



## **Tinker, Tailor, Solider, Spy by I Am The Ox**

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**Summary:** Picking up the story at the start of Series 2 Chapter 9, Mike and Eleven's reunion is interrupted by the arrival of more Demodogs... But who is the mysterious visitor that suddenly dashes in and saves them? Can they close the gate in time?

## **1. Chapter 1 - The Visitor**

**Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy**

### **Chapter 1 – The Visitor**

"Eleven."

"Mike."

They embrace, tears in their eyes.

Max turns to Lucas. "Is that...?"

The boy nods, unable to tear his gaze away.

Mike pulls away first, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I never gave up on you... I called you every night.... Every night for..."

Eleven cuts him off. "353 days." She smiles through her tears. "I heard."

Mike seems confused. Wounded, even. "Why didn't you tell me you were there... Tell me you were okay?"

"Because I wouldn't let her." Hopper replies before Eleven can. His voice is heavy with emotion. M16 swinging on its shoulder strap, he crosses to her. Mike, speechless, finds himself pushed out of the way.

"The hell is this? Where've you been?" Hopper demands.

"Where have you been?" She responds, her tone defensive, accusatory.

Hopper simply pulls her into a hug. Eleven returns it after a moment.

Mike suddenly finds his voice. "You've been hiding her... You've been hiding her this whole time?" The sentence ends in a yell, his teenage voice ragged with fury as he pushes towards the older man.

"Hey!" Hopper rounds on him and stops Mike in his tracks with a

hand on his shirt. "Let's talk. Alone."

There is a bloodcurdling screech from outside. Inside the house, suddenly all is silent. Imperceptibly, Max takes Lucas' hand.

There's another scream. Eleven's deep brown eyes widen and she turns to face the way she came. Ever so slowly the door begins to swing shut, apparently all by itself, and a trickle of blood runs down her nose.

Hopper lets go of Mike, who remains frozen on the spot, then raises his weapon once more. Eleven looks back at him.

"More of them." She says quietly, the statement chilling in its simplicity.

"Shit." Hopper voice sinks to a growl. "Back against that wall. Go!" The last word is barked when Eleven doesn't respond.

Mike steps forward to take her hand and together they join the others. Nancy raises her rifle and Lucas, emboldened by Max's presence, releases her hand to draw back his wrist rocket. Dustin, sensing the opportunity, offers Max his hand instead, but her attention is so focused on Lucas she doesn't notice.

"How many?" Hopper's voice is barely above a whisper.

Behind him, Eleven shrugs helplessly. "Don't know. Can't see." Her eyes are wide as saucers.

"Well, try." Hopper brings the gun up to his shoulder.

Mike puts his arm around Eleven protectively. "I... I won't lose you again."

There's another ghastly, ear-piercing cry. The creatures are getting close now, the sound of a hundred inhuman feet now audible.

"Shit." Hopper curses again, checking his shoulder to make sure the others are far enough back. He knows he should say something reassuring, but can't think of anything.

"Don't worry." He comes up with in the end.

Yet another screech. The abominations must be right outside. A shadow flashes across the room as one of them passes by the window. Surely it's just a matter of time before one of them finds a way in. In his head, Hopper vows to take at least the first seven down with him. He can't let anything happen to these kids. To Karen. To Eleven.

*\*scritch scratch scratch\**

One of them has found the door. It's trying to get in. Hopper steels himself, nods to Nancy, and they approach the door. Guns raised. Ready as they'll ever be.

*\*BZZZZZZZZZZT\**

Out of nowhere, a tremendous flash of light floods through the window and illuminates the room. Just as suddenly, it's gone. The scratching stops.

There's barely time for Nancy and Hopper to exchange 'what the hell?' glances before the strange, buzzing sound returns again.

*\*bzzzt\**

*\*bzzzt\**

*\*bzzzzzzt\**

From outside there comes a very quiet, but distinctly recognisable, yelp. The sound of an animal in pain.

*\*bzzzt\**

And then silence. But then footsteps.

Nancy and Hopper share another glance. As one, they back away from the door. The footsteps continue. They mount the porch, and seem to stop outside the door. There's a brief pause.

*\*BANG\**

The door flies open, the moment somehow captured in slow motion. On the step, there is a figure. A human figure.

Or what seems to be, anyway.

It's dressed from head to toe in dark grey and covered in a thick layer of dust. Grey boots, grey fatigues, grey shirt. What looks like grey body armour, festooned with items of grey equipment. Grey gloves holding a slimline grey rifle, brandished butt first from breaking in the door. A grey helmet encasing its head entirely – even the visor is grey, or at least mirrored so it seems that way. The only details of a different colour are barely visible beneath the dirt; a pair of crossed silver swords above a five-pointed gold star adorns the left of its chest.

The occupants of the room stare back as the figure regards them for what seems like an eternity.

There is a crackle. The sound of a speaker coming to life. And then a voice, robotic and canned.

*"¿Qué año es esto?"*

They look back blankly. There's another crackle; a brief chirp, this time.

*"Quelle année est-ce?"*

Again, no response.

The figure seems to pause, thinking. Then, ever so slowly, it begins to remove its helmet.

From around the room there is a collective, involuntary gasp. Beneath it, is a boy. A boy of perhaps sixteen, seventeen at most. He has short, blond hair; short almost to the degree Eleven's had been, but unkempt as if left to do its own thing for a while. His eyes are steely and somewhere between blue and the same shade of grey as his clothes, but they seem old – far older than the rest of his youthful features, despite the partially obscuring grime.

He places his helmet beneath his arm and focuses on each of the

room's occupants in turn. Then, with the uncertain tones of a voice that has not been used in a very long time, opens his mouth and speaks.

"When am I?"

The room remains silent in utter bewilderment. Then, surprisingly, Mike pipes up. He checks his watch. "It's about 12:30. At night. October 27th."

This doesn't seem to answer the question. The figure speaks again.

"What... Year?"

This time it's Nancy who responds. "1984. It's 1984."

The change in the boy's face is dramatic. His jaw loses its hard line. What little colour there was beneath the dirt suddenly drains away. His eyes seem to suddenly lose their shimmer in the flickering lamplight. The rifle drops limply to his side.

"I'm too late." He whispers, apparently to no one in particular. He seems unable to comprehend the meaning of his own words, as if in total disbelief.

"I'm too late."

His legs seem to give way. He sinks to his knees, the weapon falling from his grasp. He looks up once more at the faces of the occupants of the room before collapsing to the floor. He's passed out.

Behind him, where he had been standing, there is a pool of thick, red blood.

## 2. Chapter 2 - Origins

### Chapter 2 – Origins

13-year-old Squire Tanner shoulders his bag and hurries out of the classroom as the last echoes of the afternoon alarm die out. Making his way down the wide, expansive corridor, he's soon joined by two other boys of the Ghost Academy – Squires Tinker and Tomlin.

"How was weaponry, Tink?" Tanner grins.

"Okay, I guess." Tinker isn't giving much away.

Tomlin screws up his face. "Okay?! He shot Knight-Sergeant Fryer again." He bursts out laughing and Tanner joins in.

"It's bullshit, anyway. Fryer makes me do all the demos just 'cos I'm a Pyro. It's not fair." Tinker mumbles.

Tanner punches his friend's shoulder good-naturedly. "Don't sweat it Tink, three more months and you can kiss those guns goodbye." He lowers his voice and murmurs to Tomlin. "It's not like we're supposed to be soldiers or anything."

Tomlin suppresses a chuckle.

The three round a corner and the corridor quickly gets more crowded, becoming a heaving mass of Squires as they near the canteen. All are clad in grey uniforms and most bear the green shoulder stripes of Squadron Tango like Tanner and his friends, but some older ones wear the blue of Sierra and a couple the purple of Romeo. The latter are increasingly scarce since the previous deployment had happened several months earlier than anticipated, but the Initiates that hadn't completed their training in time were still being signed off and accommodated into Lancer battalions.

"So, what's the plan tonight?" Tinker asks as they take their places in the queue.

"Crunchball finals." Tomlin says firmly. "All the Romeo girls will be there, Tez told me." Squire 'Tez' Terrence was a trusted source in

these matters, although how he came to be in possession of such information was up for debate.

"Can't miss a chance to see your Rrrrrrrachel, eh?" Tinker rolls the 'R' enthusiastically.

"Ooooo, Rrrrrachel!" Tanner imitates Tomlin, grinning.

"Hate me 'cos you ain't me." Tomlin retorts. "You're sore you don't have my smooth moves."

Tinker chuckles. "Oooo Rrrrrachel, look at my smoooooooooth moves! I'm so smoooooooooth! Look at me!"

"Hey Rrrrrachel, d'ya wanna see my smoooooooooth balls?" Tanner adds with a laugh.

"You better..." Tomlin's comeback is cut off by the PA system beeping.

*\*Squire Tanner, report to the Erie. Squire Tanner, report to the Erie.\**

It beeps again. The momentary hush that had fallen over the occupants of the canteen disappears and the hubbub of conversation resumes. Tanner suddenly feels an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"What've you done this time?" Tinker asks the question half in jest. Squires were seldom summoned to the Erie unless there was something seriously wrong.

"Maybe I'm getting promoted... I'll get to hang round with all the Romeo girls I like." Tanner puts a brave face on it.

Tomlin grins and thumps his friend's shoulder slightly harder than necessary. "You wish."

Tanner leaves his place in the queue and heads for the elevator. He reaches it and presses the top button for the highest floor. An instant later, the doors slide open. Inside the lift there is a Knight – Tanner recognises him as Knight-Captain Lee, one of the marksmanship instructors. The boy snaps to attention and salutes, his right fist

touching the left hand side of his chest; the Knight nods and returns the gesture with slightly less enthusiasm, then strides off.

Tanner steps inside the lift and the doors close. There's a slight hum and a sensation of weightlessness as the mechanism transfers him from one side of the Academy to the other, then the doors ping open and he finds himself staring into the Scribe's office. The Scribe, sitting behind her oval desk, beckons to him.

"Ah, Squire Tanner. The Lord Paladin will see you now."

"Y-yes? Umm, thank you, ma'am." He stammers. He's never met the Academy's founder and principal before.

The Scribe indicates a grand entranceway to her left and presses a button on the desk. The massive doors begin to swing open.

"Go on now, don't keep him waiting." She smiles at him. Tanner just about manages a half smile in return and nods politely. He steps through the doorway and the doors shut behind him.

"Squire Tanner." A voice booms around the room. It's twilight inside and Tanner can't tell where it's coming from. His training takes over and he stands to attention, saluting in the darkness. "Y-you wanted to see me, sir?"

"Step forward, my boy." Again, the voice seems to come from everywhere. Hesitantly, Tanner steps forward. The light brightens. He continues his progress and, very soon, it's possible to make out a shadowy figure, silhouetted in a huge square window. Tanner keeps going.

Then his mind is blown.

Outside the window is a light blue sky, punctuated only by an occasional fluffy white cloud and the odd wisp of haze in the distance. Miles below, beginning at the horizon and stretching as far as the eye can see, is the familiar black and red pulsating cloud that masks the Rift. Scarcely visible are the tendrils that grow within and constantly churn like the tentacles of some twisted sea monster.

"It's quite a sight, is it not?" It's the same voice, but this time quieter.

It belongs to the figure standing by the window. "Come, look closely."

Tanner doesn't need a second invitation. He trots towards the window. As he approaches, the figure turns to look at him. "Do you know who I am?"

Tanner's training kicks in again. He snaps to attention and salutes the figure, who he can now see to be an elderly man with a well-trimmed white beard and deep-set hazel eyes. He is clad in a crimson waistcoat braided with gold and sports a matching silken neckerchief. He wears a pair of leather breeches tucked into his knee-high boots, themselves trimmed with metal of the expensive variety. On his head, there sits a tri-corn hat with a long purple feather tucked into the seam. Tanner, like every human being on the planet, does know who he is.

"Yes sir! Lord Paladin Tiberius Craigthorpe Ghost, High Commander of Paladins, Lead Scientist of Project Alphabet and Founder – Principal – of the Ghost Academy. Captain of the 501st Rift Marines, the first Riftwalker, and the only man to have made it through the temporal barrier – and returned alive, sir."

The Lord Paladin chuckles. "It's good to see you have been paying attention, my boy." He turns back to the window. "Tell me... What do you see?"

Tanner gazes outside for a moment before replying. "I see... The Rift, sir. But... From above?"

The Lord Paladin chuckles again. "Yes, the Erie is quite a marvel of engineering. The only building in the surviving world still unswamped by the cancer of the rift, to my knowledge."

They stand there in silence for a few moments more. Then, the Lord Paladin turns back to Tanner. "I expect you are wondering why I brought you here." He takes the boy by the arm and leads him over to a small table, a chair at each end. He gestures for Tanner to sit and then does the same. "I understand you are familiar with the sponsorship system?"

Tanner nods. The sponsorship system was simply a scheme whereby

the inhabitants of every Raydome – the vast geodesic domes inhabited by the surviving members of the human race – would choose a Squire to sponsor from each new batch. As that Squire grew, they would follow their progress and contribute towards their training in the hope that their chosen Squire would make the grade and be chosen as a Paladin Riftwalker – the ultimate honour both Squire and Raydome could achieve.

"Good. The support of the population is key and the Squires act as a symbol of hope for a brighter future – particularly when one of you becomes a Paladin. However, I'm sure you also realise that it is mostly an exercise in boosting the morale of the people, rather than an integral part of your development."

Tanner nods again. This was a fact that remained unspoken among the Squires, but all of them had a fairly good idea of what was going on. Excursions to the particular Raydome that supported you were strange affairs and not frequent – the Squire would be paraded around the streets and then stood in front of the inhabitants to be all but worshipped, something described by Tanner's Historical Assimilation teacher as being treated 'like a rock star'. This sounded fun, but got boring very quickly, so it was generally accepted among the Squires that the only decent bit about it was the food provided.

The Lord Paladin continues. "As you know, the twelve chosen from Squadron Tango will become the 20th Paladin dozen to enter the Rift, and as far as the population are aware, our 20th group of alphabetic heroes attempting to save us all. However, what they do not know is, you will likely be the last."

Tanner sits up in his chair at this. "I'm sorry, sir?"

The Lord Paladin stands and crosses back to the window. Tanner follows him.

"Consider." The old man begins. "Over the past century, the Rift has grown unimaginably – to such an extent that we are unable to trace its exact origins, save for an approximate time and location. It has swallowed all in its path and continues to do so at a rate that – and there is no gentle way to put this – is increasing alarmingly. You will have noticed that the Paladins from Squadron Romeo were deployed

into an alignment several months early – too early, some argue." A deep frown crosses his brow at this. "But alas, we were left with little other choice. At the rate the Rift is growing, we are running out of time. From now on, every alignment counts. It is very likely that yours will be the last."

Tanner had been listening intently, trying to take in the revelations he was being entrusted with. Still, he struggled to comprehend entirely. "Sir... If you don't mind my asking... Why are you telling me this?"

The Lord Paladin looks the Squire up and down, an ironic smile forming on his lips. "Because you, my boy, could well be the last hope of humanity."

"But... Sir?" Tanner is disbelieving.

"I do hope you listen more carefully in your classes, Tanner." The old man chides him.

"I'm sorry, sir. But... Me? You mean... I'll be the last one? The last Riftwalker?" Tanner manages to get the words out at length. "What about Sierra? What if they manage to close the Rift first?"

"The Alignment for Squadron Sierra will be far less than ideal." A grimace crosses the Lord Paladin's face as if this is something that has been agonised over, likely because it has far deeper consequences than apparent. "And at the moment Tanner, you are nothing but a Squire – and a Squire you shall remain until you prove to us all you are worthy of the rank of Paladin. Then, of course, we can talk about the Rift – but that is why I called you in here."

"Yes sir." Tanner was expectant.

"Now, your particular skill is Sixth Sense, the most suitable for a Paladin, and you are currently scoring in our top percentile. But these figures cannot be allowed to drop and simply remaining the same is not sufficient – if you are to have any chance of entering the Rift, let alone bearing the mantle of saviour of the human race, you must become better than the best – you must become perfection. We have noted that your current company and routine is likely to impair your

chances of this, so you must disassociate yourself from all distractions immediately. If you do not, we will have to take further measures."

"Distractions, sir?" Tanner queries, but fears he already knows the answer.

"Distractions. Specifically, the Squires with which you evidently associate with at all possible times."

Tanner momentarily forgets where he is. "Those 'distractions' are my friends! Sir." He adds quickly. He regrets the outburst almost as it leaves his lips.

The Lord Paladin stares at him. Tanner can feel the glare going straight through him. "I am going to give you the opportunity to rethink your previous statement."

A shiver runs through Tanner, but he stands his ground. "Sir... Those are my friends. They're Squires too, the best of the best – they've got just as much chance of making it as I have, sir."

The Lord Paladin is beginning to look irate. "Then I'm beginning to think my faith in you may have been misplaced, boy. That was an order. A direct one. Have we taught you nothing? Perhaps a spell in the Shock Box for your 'friends' will remind you how authority works?"

Tanner knows Squires who have been in the Shock Box. It's not something he would wish on anyone, let alone his best friends and closest allies. He looks deep into the old man's eyes and makes an agonising decision. "That... That won't be necessary sir, I apologise. There's no need to involve them. I'll s-s-stay away." It's a struggle for Tanner to get the last few words out.

The Lord Paladin stares at him again, his glare stripping away all pretences. After what feels like an eternity, he seems satisfied. "You will be isolated, along with a hand selected group of our finest prospects. You will study hard, train hard and become as fine an Initiate as has ever taken the final trial. And one final point; you will not mention this conversation to anyone. The information you have heard here today is highly classified and must not be relayed to

anyone - you know who will be the first to suffer if you disobey, of course."

Tanner nods. "I understand, sir."

"Do not let us down, Tanner. The fate of humanity could well rest upon your shoulders." The Lord Paladin's expression softens for a moment, but does nothing to ease Tanner's inner fury.

The boy snaps to attention stiffly and salutes once more. "I won't, sir. Futurum est victima."

"Do you know what that means, Tanner?"

"Yes sir. My sacrifice is for our future."

"And don't you forget it."

### 3. Chapter 3 - Friends Don't Lie

#### Chapter 3 – Friends Don't Lie

"Gov... joy... wha... co... er... ay..."

*Fragments of a sentence.*

Tanner's head swims as a vague notion of consciousness begins to return, urged on by the faint voices somewhere nearby. The dull and muffled nature of the conversation reminds him of the weeks he'd spent inside the Rift, clinging to a single thread of reality and listening to the other dimensions brushing by.

"...And what if he's from the government, Joyce? What if he's come to take her away?" The voice is low, kept hushed – the tone deep and growling. *It's a man*, a voice inside Tanner's head tells him.

"Just look at him, Jim! He's a kid! He's no older than Jonathan." This voice is female and its owner is emotional – it dawns on Tanner that they are in fact discussing him.

"Joyce, we can't take that chance. I won't let them take her again." The man sounds desperate.

"He saved us from those... Things... And he's hurt... Isn't it the least we can do to give him a chance?" The woman, Joyce, appears to be fighting his corner. But why?

"Ugggh..." Tanner opens his eyes and coughs violently as the room spins. The conversation abruptly stops and two people step into his heavily blurred vision – the owners of the voices. Then, at the sight of their faces, it all comes flooding back. The mission, the crash, the battle, the terrible moment of realisation. *I'm too late.*

"Hey, sweetie. How are you feeling?" Such is the weight of his despair, Tanner doesn't register Joyce talking to him.

"Ugh..." He chokes again, this time more in misery than discomfort.

"Not so good, huh?" Tanner's vision starts to lose its fuzziness and he

sees Joyce smile down at him kindly. Even to Tanner's numb senses, that seems strange.

Then she steps aside and it's the man who's standing over him.

"Who sent you, kid?" He demands. Tanner ignores him and tries to raise his hands to his face.

For some reason, he can't.

He looks down in confusion and sees he is half sitting, half lying on a wooden dining chair. A glance behind him confirms the suspicion eating away at the back of his mind. His wrists are handcuffed behind his back. He jumps in shock and instinctively struggles against them, but it's no good – despite his genetically modified muscular construction and many years of training, he's still too weak to do anything about it. *I was injured*, he remembers. He looks down again and spots a large bandage wrapped around his right leg, blood already seeping through. It's a bad one.

"Did you hear me, kid?" The man asks again, his voice rising in both intensity and volume.

Tanner's utter dejection is complete. Not only has he failed his mission and arrived too late to close the Rift, but been captured by the residents of a time in which he should not exist. The technology he carries alone is enough to raise suspicion and put an end to all humanity's hope of survival – especially if it should fall into military hands. The entire course of history could be rewritten up to a point where it affects his future, and this cannot be allowed to happen. His eyes dart around the room, desperately looking for his equipment – despite the darkness, he can just about make it out, lying discarded on the floor. *Less than 15 feet away*, he notes reluctantly. He knows what he has to do.

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." Tanner blurts nearly the entire detonation code for the small explosive charge buried at the base of his neck. All he has to do is say the final word – tongue-twister – and he, along with everything else inside a 15-foot radius, will be history. Beneath his suit, below his skin, the detonator begins to glow red.

"What?" The man glares at Tanner, obviously questioning his sanity. The boy forces the fear from his face and looks up, making eye contact. He feels a sudden sensation of sad satisfaction that they'd get nothing out of him despite his failure.

*"Futurum est victima."* Tanner speaks evenly as steels himself inside. *Here we go. Be with you soon, guys.*

**\*Crash\***

There's the sound of a number of feet charging into the room.

"Chief! Mrs Byers! Eleven knows a way to close the gate! Chief! Mrs Byers!"

Flicking a glance back over his shoulder, Tanner can just make out a group of five children bursting through the door. They are followed by two older boys and a girl, who remain in the doorway apologetically.

"She can do it Chief, Mrs Byers!" The boy at the head of the group has long, curly hair and is flushed with excitement, his voice shrill.

Hopper rounds on them angrily. "Henderson, what did I tell you?" Dustin hastily shrinks back into the rest of the group. Eleven steps forward, the only one unfazed by the Chief's death stare.

"Need to close the gate." She begins. "Can close the gate. Help Will. Need to..."

"That's enough!" Hopper barks. Eleven looks taken aback. "Get out, all of you!"

There's a murmur of discontent, but the group turn and begin to shuffle out. Joyce sends Hopper a look. "Jim, closing the gate is our only..."

Hopper sends her a look right back. A 'not in front of the government secret agent' look.

"What gate?" Tanner asks abruptly.

That word... It rang a bell. It had taken him a moment to place it, but 'gate' had been used by his old Historical Assimilation teacher to describe an early version of the Rift – before it had begun to grow and swallow entire continents. Hopper glares at the back of the retreating Dustin's head.

"What do you know about the gate, sweetie?" Joyce asks the question firmly, although her tone remains kind.

"He's from the government..." Hopper warns.

Suddenly, Tanner has a decision to make. He couldn't risk them finding out his true identity... Could he? Information like that getting out could change the course of history and destroy any chance that remained of closing the Rift. But, the more he thinks about it, the more Tanner realises he in fact has very little choice. He's the only hope. The last Riftwalker. Even the slimmest chance that these strange people are talking about the actual Rift – and the even slimmer chance that the girl knows a way to close it – is better than what he's looking at right now. And would it hurt to find out? He could tell them who he was, ask the question then pop the charge the second he didn't like the way things were going. Tanner's mind is made up.

"The future, actually."

There's silence before Hopper scoffs. "The what?" There's a barely audible scuffle as the children reappear.

"The year 2089."

Hopper explodes with mirthless laughter. "Bullshit! You're gonna have to do better than that, kid."

"Just hear me out." Tanner's voice carries a sudden note of authority that takes even Hopper by surprise. "My name is Star-Paladin Tanner of Ghost Squadron Tango, serial number 20-11-41-45-18. Where I come from, the Rift – or gate as I believe you know it – has grown to such an extent that humanity is at risk of being wiped out altogether. Our only hope, and my mission, is to find some way of closing the Rift before it swells. So if you know of some way it can be done,

please, tell me – the lives of millions depend on it."

Silence again. Hopper is, understandably, somewhere between insulted at being expected to believe this story and confused as to the conviction with which it was delivered. He had been a police officer for a long time – he knew when someone was lying. And, despite everything, he couldn't read this kid at all.

Joyce, too, is unsure. She frowns slightly and then smiles unexpectedly at Tanner. The boy, a little taken aback and uncertain of what to do, returns it. As the single parent of two teenage boys, she also knew a thing or two about lies, and this one really seemed to believe what he was saying.

"Wouldn't be the strangest thing that's happened." She murmurs to Hopper.

"You're telling me you believe this kid?" The Chief turns to look at her incredulously. Despite this, annoyingly he can't fault the logic. Joyce angles her head, uncommitted.

Tanner realises he doesn't have anything else to say. It's quite natural they don't believe him, he guesses – he has no proof to give them, besides his timely appearance with an arsenal of futuristic weaponry.

Then, something unexpected happens. A girl detaches herself from the group of children and makes her way towards him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Hopper moves as if to stop her, but she raises a hand towards him and he seems to think better of it.

She approaches Tanner and moves around so she can look at him. Not knowing what else to do, he stares straight back – her eyes are mesmerising, dark brown and almost as deep as the Rift itself. Her hair is dark too, short and plastered back. Her face bears the remnants of makeup and her cheeks are faintly stained with tears – she's been crying.

"Telling the truth." She declares finally. Offering no further explanation, she moves to stand beside Hopper.

"I'm... Yes. Thank you." Is all Tanner can manage, a little lost for

words.

Hopper looks at Eleven, exasperated. "Not you as well! How do you know he didn't just make that up?"

"Killed the..." She seems to be searching for the word.

"Demodogs." Dustin had apparently crept closer, backed up by the others. Eleven nods. "Demodogs." She lifts a finger to indicate Tanner. "Helped us. Friend. Friends don't lie."

Silence once more. Then, another of the boys moves past Tanner and stands with Eleven.

"I'm with El." Says Mike. "He saved us, so why would he lie to us?" He sends a look in the direction of Hopper that would have struck down a lesser man.

Dustin clearly agrees as he follows Mike over to Eleven. "Lucas, Max? What d'ya say?"

"I guess she's right." "Sure, whatever." The other boy and girl join their friends. The older three hang back, shifting their feet awkwardly.

"Unbelievable." Hopper shakes his head.

Tanner senses the moment. "Look, I get that you don't trust me and I understand this all must sound pretty far-fetched, but one of those kids... The girl... She said something about closing the gate. Believe me... Every second counts."

Hopper looks at Joyce again, who nods her head slightly. Still shaking his, the Chief pulls out a key and strides over to Tanner. "I must be outta my mind." The lock clicks in the handcuffs. Hopper leans down over him. "You stay away from her. I don't know if you're who you say you are, but wherever you're from, whoever you work for, if you so much as touch one hair on her head I will throw you right back into that 'Rift' of yours myself. Are we clear?"

Tanner rubs his wrists appreciatively. "Crystal clear, sir. Thank you."

Hopper grunts and head back over to the others. "So what's this about closing the gate?"

Dustin grins. "Come with us."

## 4. Chapter 4 - Cloverhead

### Chapter 4 – Cloverhead

The alarm blares non-stop throughout the darkened corridors and classrooms of the Ghost Academy, its staccato beat giving 15-year-old Initiate Tanner an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach. He's standing by the mess room door and peering through the small window at the top, but can see nothing but darkness outside. He hears a noise behind him and spins to find Initiate Trent standing there, shifting his feet anxiously.

"What's going on out there? Trent automatically speaks in a whisper, despite the cacophony of the alarm.

"Jack shit." Tanner replies, before raising his voice over the clamour. "Got anything, Tails?"

In one of the small sleeping cells adjoining the mess room, Initiate Tailor is sitting cross legged on the edge of her cot, eyes closed. A moment later she reopens them, hops down and makes her way over to the boys.

"Nothing. You know, I'd say all's quiet if it wasn't for this..." The alarm masks the obscenity she chose to describe it.

"It must mean something." Trent reasons. "Could be another test?"

Tanner shakes his head. "Don't think so. We've got the written trials tomorrow, plus the door's still locked." He gives the metal security hatch a push. It doesn't budge an inch.

"Weird." Tailor muses. "You'd think they'd let us get some sleep."

Right on cue, the alarm ceases and the building is abruptly plunged back into a silence that seems somehow unearthly after the din just moments before. The Initiates exchange bewildered glances.

"Well, thank Grumman for that." Tanner voices everyone's thoughts.

"I don't know about you boys, but I'm going back to bed. We've got a

big day tomorrow." Tailor turns to head back to her cell. The boys do the same, but then something makes Trent stop.

"Hey... Do you feel that?" The boy stands stock-still, concentrating on the cold concrete floor beneath his feet. There's something wrong, but it takes him a moment to figure out what it is. Ever-so-slightly, the building has begun to tremble.

"Feel what?" Tanner stops too, turning curiously to look at his friend.

"The floor... It's moving, I swear..." Trent tells himself he must be imagining it. But, although it had been barely noticeable at first, the shaking is increasing in force.

Tailor reappears from her cell and cocks her head, perplexed. "That's weird... Yeah, I feel it too..." She pads across to the door and looks out the window. Still, nothing but darkness outside.

"Uuuuurgh..." All of a sudden Tanner doubles over in apparent agony, clutching his head in both hands.

"Tan?" Tailor runs over to him. The vibrations in the floor are mounting by the moment.

Trent is close behind. "What's the matter? Where does it hurt?"

Tailor places a hand on the shoulder of the convulsing Tanner and closes her eyes. She reopens them almost instantly, an expression of confusion etched on her face. "I can't read him... There's some kind of interference..."

"Uurgh..." Tanner groans again, but then the pain seems to subside. He sinks to the floor, breathing heavily, then tries to speak. "See... See..."

"What, Tan? See what?" Trent demands.

**\*BOOM\***

Almost before the words leave his lips, a massive explosion rocks the building, flinging Tailor and Trent to the floor. There's the sound of falling masonry and the lights go out. Then silence. The dust settles

and an indeterminate amount of time passes.

Ears ringing, Trent finally hoists himself upright. "You guys okay?" He yells, deafened and unable to hear his own voice.

Somewhere nearby, Tailor sits up. She's deaf too and can't hear him, but has similar thoughts. The lights choose this moment to come back on, far dimmer than before. She waves a hand to Trent, signalling her survival. He acknowledges, relieved.

"Urrgh..." Tanner groans for the third time in as many minutes, raising himself to his knees with an almighty effort. A cloud of dust rises as he eventually struggles to his feet and totters over to the door. He finds it swinging off its hinges. Turning back towards the room, he sees the rest of the Initiates beginning to tumble out of their cells, sleepy, bleary-eyed and bleeding. Tailor spots this too and is immediately on her feet, assessing casualties with a brief tap on the shoulder and flicker of her eyelids. She wordlessly reassures the walking wounded and ushers those with more serious injuries to sit down where they are.

"What's going on?" One manages to ask – his name is Turner.

"Some kind of explosion!" Tailor shouts in reply, her hearing still ineffective. "Help me check on everyone!" She addresses Trent, who nods and sets about systematically poking his head into cells. A few others follow his lead, while Tanner steps out into the corridor.

He returns a few moments later and trots over to Tailor. "You okay, Tails?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She's distracted, but can at least make out what he's saying now. Seeing his friends conversing, Trent makes his way over.

"Good. You're doing great." Tanner smiles warmly before his expression reverts to one of concern. "Listen, I just went over to the stairs, and there's... There's noises down there. People screaming, sounds like. I think we need to go down and see if we can help." If the other two are scared, they're doing a good job of hiding it. Tanner knows he is and hopes he's as good as the other two at concealing their emotions. They both immediately nod their agreement on

hearing his suggestion, but before they can make a move for the door there is a cry from inside one of the cells.

"We need some help in here! Trav's hurt really bad! Someone get an Empath!"

Tailor looks at Trent and Tanner, her expression pained – they know full well she's the only Empath on the entire floor.

"It's okay." Tanner pats her arm. "You're needed. Me and Trent will go. We'll find out what's going on and come straight back."

Tailor looks at them calculatingly, as if questioning whether it's a good idea to let them out of her sight. "Don't be long." She says finally, turns on her heel and heads back towards the cells. "On my way!"

Tanner chuckles, winks at Trent and leads the way out into the corridor. The normally purified atmosphere is thick with smoke and the red emergency lighting casts strange shadows on the walls. Coughing into their sleeves, the boys round a corner and head for the stairs.

"Lads' night out." Tanner suggests lightly.

Trent laughs, then pauses. He seems troubled. "Tan... Just before the explosion... You said you could see something. What was it?"

Tanner thinks carefully before replying. A bolt of fear runs through him as he realises he's pretty sure he knows the answer. Even so, he's not ready to admit it yet – especially in surroundings which were, despite his training, beginning to creep him out. "Nothing..." He replies unconvincingly.

Trent, unsurprisingly, is not satisfied. "Come on, Tan. You definitely said you saw something. Was it something to do with your Sixth..." He trails off and takes a sharp breath as he makes the same connection as Tanner. "This... This explosion... Probably just a coincidence, right? Broken generator or something?"

The more Trent rambles, the more certain Tanner is that it's not a coincidence. Still, the alternative is far less pleasant, so he chooses to

cling to what little hope he has. "Yeah, I guess," is his noncommittal response.

The march on in silence and soon reach the stairwell. Sure enough, there are sounds echoing up from the level below - men shouting, people screaming and, alarmingly, the unmistakable sound of radiation gunfire. Trent and Tanner exchange glances, but neither is about to turn back now.

They start down the first flight of stairs. The smoke is acrid and smells.... Funny. It's hard to breath and they cough into the sleeves of their jumpsuits as they make it to the first landing. Trent motions to Tanner to stay down low and this helps a little as they head down the second flight. Then, Tanner holds his fist up in a gesture for stop – he has gone down just far enough to make out the corridor below. It's a terrible mess – the ceiling seems to have collapsed in places and the floor is dotted with small fires and rubble. Disturbingly, there is a dark shape stretched out by the foot of the stairs.

Tanner lowers his fist cautiously and begins to advance down the final few steps. When he reaches the shape, he suppresses a cry. It's an Initiate, wearing the colours of Squadron Sierra – and it's obvious there is little anyone can do for him now, Empath or not. Judging by his injuries, it appears he's been struck by a piece of falling masonry – but as Tanner looks closer, he realises there is a large wound on his leg. It can only be described as a bite mark.

Trent arrives by his friend's side. "Oh my Grumman." He exclaims in a whisper. "That's Initiate Sandrax. He was two points off making it into the Rift. I remember him."

The Initiates that made Paladin from Sierra had been deployed into their scheduled alignment no more than two weeks previously – and now this promising Lancer was lying dead in a level three stairwell. A more concerning matter, however, is what killed him.

As if to answer that question, there is another scream in the distance – this time followed by a startlingly inhuman cry. Trent gulps and starts back up the stairs, but then the cry sounds again – it's getting closer. Tanner thinks fast – he grabs his friend's arm and vaults the rail, landing in the darkness beside the staircase. There's a small

cupboard there, full of cleaning equipment – Tanner hastily kicks some of it out the way and holds the door open. "In here."

Trent follows his friend's lead and together they squeeze in and shut the door – and not a moment too soon as the horrific cry reverberates through the corridor again. It's coming from just around the corner. Tanner holds his breath and, despite Trent's silent protests, opens the door a crack. He has to know. And very soon, he does. Around the corner waddles one of the most terrifying monstrosities he has ever seen. It's a category nine. Tanner pulls back from the door, shaken to his very core. He looks at Trent and, in the near pitch darkness, whispers one word.

"Cloverhead."

## 5. Chapter 5 - The Reanimator

### Chapter 5 – The Reanimator

Everyone crowds around a small table in the corner of the Byers' living room. Joyce sits on a stool, staring down at a piece of cardboard with the words '*close gate*' scrawled on it in red crayon. Hopper stands beside her, hand resting on her shoulder, with Mike and Eleven in close attendance. The other kids ring the table, along with the older girl and boy.

Tanner is fully aware of their mistrust and, despite being desperate to hear what Eleven has to say, stands apart from the group. He's joined by another boy of perhaps the same age as him, or slightly older. He has long, untidy brown hair and wears a blue denim jacket. He greets Tanner with a smile, extending a hand.

"Steve."

Tanner shakes it without taking his eyes off Eleven.

Steve is not deterred. "What you did to those... Things out there? Pretty sweet."

Tanner smiles a little at this. He allows his gaze to leave the girl at the table and their eyes meet for a moment.

"Tan."

"Sorry?"

"My name's Tan."

"Oh." Steve grins. "Good to meet you, Tan."

"It's not like it was before." Hopper begins. "It's grown... A lot... And that's considering if we can get in there, the place is crawling with those dogs..."

"Demodogs." Dustin quickly turns to correct the Chief, who sighs heavily and pauses.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, Demodogs. Like, Demogorgon and dogs, you put 'em together and it sounds pretty badass and..."

"How is this important right now?" Hopper cuts off the explanation.

"It's not, I'm sorry." Dustin turns away again. There's a brief pause before Eleven speaks.

"I can do it." She says simply.

"You're not hearing me." Hopper comes back immediately.

"I'm hearing you. I can do it." Is the reply.

"Even if El can, there's still another problem. If the brain dies, the body dies." Mike says.

"I thought that was the whole point?" Max asks.

"It is, but if we're really right about this, if El closes the gate and kills the mind flayer's army..." Mike continues.

"...Then Will's a part of that army." Lucas breathes.

"Closing the gate will kill him." Mike finishes.

There's silence across the room as this statement is digested. Tanner, meanwhile, is struggling to keep up. He still has no idea how the girl is planning to close the Rift, but it seems her companions have complete faith in her ability to do so – which cannot be unfounded. Anyway, she's the only chance that Tanner has right now, but as a result of this latest realisation she may now be disinclined to try. He steps forward to join the circle around the table.

"I don't know who Will or this 'mind flayer' are, but maybe I can help? You said he's part of an army?"

Hopper bristles at Tanner's interruption and is about to shut him down, but Joyce holds her hand up and replies. "Will is my son... There's something wrong with him..." She trails off, at a loss for how

to explain it. Mike takes over.

"He's our friend. He got trapped in the upside down last year and..."

"The 'upside down'?" Tanner doesn't know what the this is either.

"The other side of the gate." It's Dustin that replies this time. "And he nearly got eaten by a demigorgon, but El saved him." The latter part of this sentence may as well have been in a foreign language for all Tanner could understand, but he'd found out what he needed.

"Right. Can I see him?"

Again, Hopper looks like he's about to voice his disgust at this request, but Joyce gets to her feet before he can and leads the way down the hall. Tanner follows, as do the others, and they enter a small room in which a boy is stretched out unconscious on the bed. Tanner notes that he's similar in age to the others, tallying with Mike's story. Joyce takes the Paladin over to him.

"This is Will." She murmurs, kneeling down at the boy's side.

"What happened to him exactly? You say he's spent time in the Rift?" Tanner leans over to examine the boy's arms which are bared by his medical gown. He misses Tailor so much.

*No sign of Rift sickness.*

"Will has been having... Episodes for a while. We thought it was some form of PTSD from being trapped in there at first. That stands for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." Joyce elaborates when she sees the confused look on Tanner's face.

"What kind of episodes?"

"They were mainly dreams – like he was back in the upside down."

*Could be he somehow picked up Temporal Drift abilities in the Rift? Like the Cloverheads have?*

"Go on." Tanner continues his examination.

"Then, one day, we found him collapsed out in the school field. He was acting strangely... Kept drawing these pictures..." She points to the crayon artworks that adorn the walls and floor of every room Tanner had seen so far.

*I'd been wondering about them.*

"The doctors did some tests... They said it's like there's something growing in his brain, taking over... Like he's possessed..."

A horrible feeling of dread sweeps over Tanner. "Possessed? How do you mean?"

"It's as if he's... Not him. Like something else is in control. The message you saw on the table, about the gate... He had to tap it out in morse code, without whatever's controlling him knowing. We couldn't let... Him... Or it... Know where we are, but it found out and then it sent those horrible... Demo-things..." She pauses to compose herself.

"We think he's been possessed by the mind flayer." Mike says gravely.

Suddenly, it all makes sense.

*A 'mind flayer'.*

Tanner shivers reflexively and fights the urge to run out of the room. "My Grumman... I'm so, so sorry..."

"Why? Why are you sorry?" Joyce demands.

"Your son... He's been attacked by a category nineteen. We call them Reanimators, and they're the most dangerous beings we've ever encountered. They have the power to take over the mental functions of any being, human or otherwise. We think they're a species of genetically-advanced viruses which have the ability to manipulate dark matter at an anatomical level – a sort of 'hive mind'. Normally they don't leave the Rift, but your son must have acquired some form of Drifting ability and been exposed... There's nothing we can do for him..."

"No, there must be..." It's as if Joyce hasn't heard anything Tanner

said.

"Even in my time, no one has ever survived a Reanimator attack. The virus is eventually fatal, but until then the victim will become increasingly violent and develop heightened strength, an immunity to pain... And from what you're saying, Will is pretty far gone. When he wakes up he'll certainly bring more cat fives... Maybe worse. It might be better for everyone... Your son included... If we... End it now."

"How dare you!" Joyce is on her feet in an instant, lunging towards Tanner and grabbing him by the shirt. Hopper is there too, trying to get Joyce off the Paladin but only so he can take hold himself. Eleven stands protectively between them and Will.

"Nobody touches Will." She says, deep brown eyes flashing.

Tanner spreads his arms wide in surrender. "Okay, okay! I'm sorry... I shouldn't have said that. But you need to understand that this... This doesn't look good."

Joyce and Hopper stay as they are for a moment, then exchange a glance and release Tanner together. Joyce sinks down onto the bed as Tanner rubs his neck appreciatively.

"I won't lose him. I can't. Not again. There's got to be a way."

Tanner doesn't know what to do. While the boy is there, they're all in danger. But, obviously, Joyce isn't going to lose her son without a fight – and who can blame her. Still, the fact remains that there is no cure for a Reanimator possession. There has been very little opportunity to find one – all documented attacks have happened within the Rift, so by the time the victim was able to receive medical attention it was too late. They were either dead or robotic killing machines by the time the Empaths reached them.

"He likes it cold..."

"What?" Hopper turns to look at Joyce.

"He likes it cold,' that's what Will kept saying to me..." She seems deep in thought. Suddenly, she jumps up and slams shut the open window.

"We keep giving it what it wants!" She exclaims like this somehow explains everything.

"Wait... You said this was a virus, right?" Nancy leaves her position by the door and approaches the bed.

"Yeah, of sorts." Tanner answers.

"So that makes Will the host..." She continues.

Jonathan, standing by the nightstand, catches on to her train of thought and nods slowly. "Which means we need to make the host uninhabitable..."

"So if he likes it cold..."

"We need to burn it out of him." Joyce finishes grimly. She turns to look at Tanner. "Will that work?"

Tanner shrugs helplessly. He understands the concept behind the plan, but honestly has no clue. It sounds risky to him at best, but still, it offers a better chance than the boy has currently got. What's more, it may encourage the others to help him close the Rift.

"I don't think it's ever been tried... But I guess there's a chance..."

"Then we have to do it somewhere he doesn't know this time." Mike says.

"Yeah, somewhere far away." Dustin agrees.

Suddenly, an enlightened expression crosses Hopper's face.

"I know a place." He says quietly.

## 6. Chapter 6 - Armoury

### Chapter 6 – Armoury

The monster is still there. For the life of him, Tanner can't work out what it's doing. It's been waddling back and forth around that same corner for the past five minutes. Again, it opens its hideous maw and emits a guttural cry.

Tanner turns to Trent in the half-light and winks at him reassuringly – the other boy can't see the Cloverhead, but almost worse is the fact he can still hear it. Still, Trent smiles back with a confidence he doesn't feel. The sound of his breathing is almost deafening. He's sure it'll find them. He just hopes Tailor doesn't come looking and stumble across the monster herself.

They remain in the cupboard under the stairs for what seems an eternity. But, their luck holds, and eventually the Cloverhead pads away whence it came. Letting out a breath he's unconsciously been holding for the past fifteen minutes, Tanner carefully opens the door and tiptoes out. Satisfied that all is clear, he motions for Trent to join him.

"What are we gonna do?" Trent asks, his voice hushed.

"We need to find a classroom with an armoury. I think there's one on this level." Tanner replies.

"Are you crazy? We'll never make it there alive!" Trent whispers back furiously. "That cat nine will eat us for breakfast!"

"Listen... You know before, when you asked me what I could see? Before the explosion?" Tanner creeps towards the bend in the corridor.

Trent has no choice but to follow. He does so reluctantly. "Yeah?"

"Well... I saw a Cloverhead. Not here, but it felt... Close. I just... Sorta... Knew." Trent stops by the corner and looks back at his friend sincerely. "I'm a Six. I can get us there."

Trent doesn't know where to begin. He's angry, for a start.

*Why wouldn't he tell me if there was even the slightest possibility we were under attack by Cloverheads?!*

He certainly wouldn't have left the sanctuary of the mess room if he'd known.

*Maybe that's why.*

"You nearly had an aneurism last time." He responds bluntly.

The mental skill of an Initiate was the last factor to develop – only maturing a year or so before they were due for deployment. Trent guessed that they were genetically programmed this way to prevent young Squires from having accidents. Despite intentions, certain skills tended to appear slightly earlier than others, leading to some Initiates possessing power but not having been trained in its use. This had, of course, been Tanner's first experience of the Sixth Sense.

"You can fry a code panel, right?" Tanner ignores the jibe.

"Yeah, I guess?" Trent is caught off guard by this. A spark dances across his fingertips at the thought. He's an Electro.

"Then I can sense a Cloverhead." Tanner pokes his head round the corner. All seems quiet. "I'll keep us alive, you get us in."

Trent shakes his head in disbelief. Then he realises Tanner's not the top scoring Initiate in his class for nothing.

"I must be mad." He goes to stand behind his friend.

Tanner allows himself a small grin, then swings around the corner and starts out along the corridor. They've barely made it halfway to the end when he raises a fist and pulls up short. He screws his eyes tight shut and winces in pain, rubbing his temples. Then, he gestures urgently to a small alcove in the wall.

"Duck in there."

Trent obeys wordlessly and presses his body against the concrete.

Tanner does the same in another inset directly opposite – and not a moment too soon, as the unmistakable outline of a Cloverhead ambles across the junction ahead. Tanner gives it a head start, then lowers his fist.

"Fair play." Trent concedes begrudgingly.

The boys continue their progress. They trot down the deserted corridors for a while, skirting around areas of collapsed ceiling and avoiding rooms where large fires rage unchecked. They do not encounter another Cloverhead, although Tanner calls a brief halt twice more. Eerily, the sounds of people screaming and calling had disappeared and there was no more noise of gunfire – just the occasional distant roar from a roving monstrosity.

"Here, this should lead to a classroom..." Tanner takes a sharp right and heads down a side passage. There is what appears to be blood splashed along one of the walls, but both boys choose to ignore it – it doesn't bear consideration.

"There!" Trent spots the door to an advanced weaponry training room.

"That's it." Tanner agrees. "Feeling sparky?"

"Just watch my back." Trent examines a small keypad to the side of the door. He places both hands across the numbers and closes his eyes as Tanner moves to keep an eye on the corridor. There's an electronic *crackle* and then a *hiss* as the entrance slides open.

"Open, sesame."

Tanner pushes past the triumphant Trent and surveys the interior. The room is undamaged - covered in dust, in fact, as if left untouched for a while. Obviously the new Squadron of Squires was not receiving training on weapons used in the Rift – unsurprising, really, considering they would never be deployed. Tanner often wondered if they were anything more than a propaganda stunt to boost the morale of the population – they did not, of course, know that the end was near.

Trent slides the door shut behind them and makes an effort to barricade it with an old filing cabinet. He turns and takes in his surroundings, then points to a small side room.

"That looks like the office."

Tanner is already through the door. He spots a safe sitting on the instructor's desk. Luckily, it's locked electronically.

"You're up!" He calls to Trent, who follows him inside.

"What would you do without me?" Trent sighs and goes through his routine with this keypad. The safe pops open easily.

"Less breaking and entering, for a start." Tanner scoops out the only object contained within – a small key. Leaving the office, he heads for a shiny metal chest over by the firing range. He slips the key into the lock and it turns. Trent joins him and together they lift the lid.

Jackpot.

Inside are four old-school pump-action Glock X-9 Focused Microwave Radiation Burst Emitters – known colloquially as 'gamma guns'. Scarcely suppressing a smile, both boys lift out a weapon. Tanner draws back the cartridge cover on his – and of course, it's not loaded.

*Where are the cells?*

He turns back to the office and is about to commence his search, when an expression of sheer horror suddenly crosses his features. He's frozen to the spot.

Trent feels a shiver run through him as he sees his friend's behaviour. "Tan... What is it? What's happened?"

Tanner looks at him, the shocked expression still etched on his face. "Shit. I wasn't concentrating. Shit. I'm sorry. There's one outside."

*I have to concentrate?*

**\*BANG\***

A huge dent appears in the metal security door. It's *right* outside. Strangely, Trent doesn't feel fear – perhaps he's numb to it after the night's events. He checks the cartridge bay of his own gamma gun, suddenly urgent.

"Where can we find ammo?"

The weapons are nothing more than shiny aluminium clubs without.

**\*BANG\***

Another dent. The metal is beginning to whiten as it weakens. It won't stand much more.

"Must be in the office." Tanner runs back inside, closely followed by Trent. Both boys begin ferreting through the draws, upending filing cabinets in their haste. No luck.

*Surely there must be cells in here somewhere?*

**\*BANG\***

**\*CRASH\***

The door collapses and the monster is through. It raises its dripping maw and sends a terrifying cry reverberating through the classroom. Tanner can see it through the office doorway. He can't believe he was so focused on finding the weapons that he hadn't noticed the throbbing in his temples – his negligence had likely just condemned them both to death.

*I'm so, so sorry.*

Trent and Tanner exchange a glance. They both know they'll go down fighting. But without ammunition, it's just a question of how long until they both succumb.

The Cloverhead takes a huge, lingering bound forwards, heading straight for the middle of the classroom. For a moment, Tanner feels a glimmer of hope it won't spot them, but this is instantly crushed when the terrifying beast turns to look directly at him. Of course, it functions on sense of smell.

Trent moves like smoke, suddenly at the office door and slamming it shut. The monster lets out a bellow of rage and leaps towards the door. *It's wood*, Tanner realises. *Shit*.

"I'm sorry." Tanner whispers to his friend again. He's not sure what's worse; that they're about to be eaten alive, or that it's his fault.

"Don't be wet." Trent says sternly, sliding the desk in front of the door – not a moment too soon, as a terrific impact shakes it. Tanner picks up his gamma gun and wields it like a bat.

**\*CRASH\***

The monster's ghastly head appears through the door - it's smashed clean through the panels. Tanner winds up and deals it an almighty crack with the butt of his weapon. The category nine shrieks in pain and withdraws. Tanner and Trent drop to the floor side by side, their backs to the desk, and suddenly all is quiet.

"Maybe I scared it off?" Tanner suggests optimistically.

**\*BOOM\***

The Cloverhead walks through the wall, not ten feet from them. Tanner mentally curses the architect who designed the thin partition.

Trent stands and swings his gun around his head before launching it in the direction of the monster. It simply clatters off the flank of its scaly neck. The Initiate backs away.

"Okay, then."

The Cloverhead cocks its head at them, unhurried. Tanner dully registers that it's in its stage six lifecycle, judging by its markings. Both boys backpeddle until their backs are against the wall and the monster approaches them, sensing it has them cornered. It begins to open its horrendous five-pointed jaws, the teeth inside whirling and churning like some twisted tornado. It emits a sound, less like a roar this time and more a growl. Its saliva splatters them and the stench is disgusting.

"Come on then, get it over with." Tanner mutters. Its dripping maw is

inches from their faces. The boys close their eyes. They're dead.

And then they're *not*.

There's a sound – not unlike a cough, but a cough that causes someone to rupture their lung. It echoes for a moment, then dies away.

And they're *still not* dead.

Tanner ventures an eye open. The Cloverhead is still standing there, in exactly the same position it had been before – but with one noticeable difference. One of its jaws is missing.

Trent opens his eyes too and feels something wet hit him on the shoulder. He spins instinctively and sees a grisly hunk of the monster's flesh sliding down the wall behind him.

"Ahhhhh!"

The whole 'getting eaten' bit was one thing, but this was quite another. It was utterly, utterly disgusting. Trent cries out in repulsion again and barrel rolls away under the still-frozen creature, desperate to get away from what had until recently been a key component of the Cloverhead's face.

The boy's escape seems to spark the monster into action. It turns away from Tanner and, emitting a blood-curdling scream, looks back through the breach in the wall.

The Initiates follow its gaze and see, standing there, Lord Paladin Tiberius Craigthorpe Ghost.

"*You hungry, beastie?*"

He blows smoke from the barrels of his two shining Smith & Wesson 500 'Bone Collector' Magnum Revolvers.

"*Eat some lead.*"

Ghost unleashes another volley. The Cloverhead is there, and then it... Isn't. Tanner ducks as a spray of blood, flesh and teeth showers

the wall behind him. The monster's decapitated corpse falls to the floor. Dead. Silence.

Trent struggles to his feet and salutes. "Lord... Lord Paladin..."

Tanner does the same and is similarly lost for words.

The Lord Paladin holsters his pistols. "Good evening, Initiates."

"Good... Good evening, sir." They manage.

"Allow me to introduce you to my two of my dearest friends – *Thunderclap* and *Thunderbolt*." He taps the weapons now hanging low on his hip. "The only handheld ballistic weapons capable of... *Eradicating* a category nine Riftdweller." He eyes the remains of the Cloverhead coldly.

The boys nod, wide-eyed.

Ghost turns to them. "And what, may I ask, are you doing here? You are both supremely lucky I was passing."

It's Tanner that pipes up. "We were... Looking for weapons, sir... We saw a dead Initiate..."

"Initiate Sandrax." Trent chimes in.

"Then we saw a Cloverhead... I mean, a category nine, and thought we had better find a gamma gun to kill it with, sir." Tanner finishes.

The Lord Paladin nods like this is nothing less than he would expect. "Then you blinked too soon." He comments. "There is a fully stocked armoury no more than a hundred yards down the corridor. Come, we shall go there now, and then on to level two." With that, he spins on his heel and marches out. Tanner and Trent, a trifle bewildered, follow.

"What does he mean, level two? Do you think he wants us to help him?" Trent asks in a whisper as they leave the classroom. He's stunned they haven't been marched back to their dormitory with nothing but a proper ear-wigging to show for their escapade.

"Guess things must be pretty bad." Tanner whispers back. "Maybe he needs all the help he can get."

"Doesn't look to me like he needs any." Trent retorts.

As promised, they reach the armoury in no time – it's literally around the next bend. The Lord Paladin keys in his access code and then stands guard beside the door.

"Initiates, you have five minutes. Use them wisely. Gear up."

## 7. Chapter 7 - Bitchin'

### Chapter 7 – Bitchin'

"Ugh..."

Tanner hisses in pain as he washes fresh blood from the large gash on his leg. He'd asked Joyce if he could use the 'restroom' – after searching hard for the right word – and had been delighted to discover it contained a bath with a showerhead. After stripping off his combat armour and perching on the side of the tub, Tanner had begun to clean his wound – as he'd suspected, the cut contained several of the category five's teeth, and it had taken him a while to coax them out.

Now he reaches for his belt, lying discarded on the floor, and pulls out a white aerosol-type can. The substance contained within is known as 'aid spray' – a substance containing millions of microscopic nanomachines designed for accelerated healing. It's used mainly in the Rift, where proper medical care is not available.

Shaking the can, Tanner applies it to his leg and immediately feels a sharp tingling pain as the miniscule robots get to work. He gives them a few minutes to make a start on stitching his skin back together, then reties the bandage applied by Joyce and straps his armour back on. Judging by their forty-five minute planning session earlier, he's going to need it.

*"El... Is gonna close the gate with her mind."*

*"Come again?"*

*"She has... Powers. She can make stuff move just by thinking about it."*

*"Wait... She's a Phsysc?"*

*A confused silence.*

*Despite the best efforts of genetic engineers, there hasn't been one for over fifty years.*

*Tanner reminds himself that it's currently over fifty years ago.*

*"Okay... But how do we know it'll work?"*

*"Because she opened it."*

*"Touché."*

He opens the restroom door to a hive of activity outside. Steve and the older girl – Tanner had found out her name was Nancy – are both ferrying large electric heaters out the front door. Hopper is carrying Will outside too, wrapped in a blanket and closely attended by Joyce. The kids are everywhere, apparently trying to be useful, while just inside the living room Mike is sharing a quiet moment with Eleven.

"Just be careful, alright? I can't lose you again." Mike says earnestly.

"You won't lose me." Eleven tries to sound reassuring.

"D'you promise?"

"Promise."

There's the makings of a moment between them, but it's cut short by Hopper calling from somewhere outside.

"El, let's go! It's time."

Reluctantly they break apart and Eleven heads for the door. Mike stays standing there for a moment, his face the picture of worry. On his way past, Tanner has a sudden impulse to tap him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, Physcs are pretty much unstoppable. If she wants to come back, she will. And trust me, she does."

The way they look at each other isn't lost on Tanner. Mike doesn't seem entirely convinced, but he nods, mumbles something in reply and follows Eleven out the door. Tanner goes to collect his helmet – the gamma gun is still in the possession of Hopper – and steps outside, where two vehicles are waiting with engines running.

"Get in." Hopper extinguishes his cigarette and indicates the rear seat of his, an old beige pickup truck with 'Police' stencilled on the side.

*Huh.*

Despite his uniform, up until now Tanner hasn't considered him an old-time Lancer. He obeys the instruction and climbs in, closely followed by Eleven who sits up front. Through the window, he can see Nancy getting in the other car, driven by Jonathan. He watches as it reverses back down the driveway, turns around, then speeds off into the night. Hopper crunches the gears of his truck and does the same. In the mirror, Tanner can see the Steve and the kids standing on the porch and resolves to do his upmost to get Eleven back in one piece if at all possible.

*But not at the expense of closing the Rift.*

They reach the end of the road and turn left, bidding farewell to the other car which takes a right. After a few more minutes of silence, Hopper speaks.

"So we're just not gonna talk about it, huh?"

For a moment Tanner thinks the policeman is talking to him, but Eleven answering saves him the difficult conversation.

"About what?" Her tone tells him she already knows.

"Oh, I don't know, I'm just curious why all of a sudden you look like some kinda MTV punk." Hopper shoots back. Eleven looks away. He sighs.

"I'm not mad, kid, I just wanna know where you've been. That's all."

Eleven pauses for a moment, clearly considering her response.

"To see mama."

Hopper does a double take.

"Okay..."

Another pause.

"How'd you get there?"

"A truck."

"A truck?"

Eleven turns back to face him.

"A big truck."

"A big truck?!"

Hopper can't quite believe this.

"Whose truck was it?"

"A man's."

"A man's?"

Tanner hopes they don't start that again. They seem to have completely forgotten he's there.

"A nice man." Eleven says with great finality.

Hopper does another double take and narrowly avoids oncoming traffic.

"Okay. So let me just get this straight in my head, a nice man in a big truck drove you to your mama's? And then what, your Aunt Becky gave you those clothes and that makeup?"

Eleven is quiet for a moment, then shakes her head sadly.

"I... I shouldn't have left."

Hopper doesn't know how to respond to that. In the back, Tanner clears his throat politely. The Chief ignores him.

"No... This isn't on you, kid. I should've been there. I should never have lied to you about your mom. Or when you could leave... Lotta

things I shouldn't have done."

Eleven says nothing. Hopper continues.

"Sometimes I feel... Feel like I'm some sorta black hole, or something."

"Black hole?" Eleven doesn't seem to have heard that word before.

"Yeah... It's this thing in outer space... It sucks everything towards it and destroys it."

In the darkness of the back seats, Tanner smiles ruefully.

*If only he knew.*

"Sarah had a picture book about outer space, she loved it..."

"Who's Sarah?" Eleven asks instantly.

"Sarah? Sarah's my girl... My little girl."

"Where is she?"

"Well that's kinda the thing, kid... She, uh... She left us."

Tanner feels extremely uncomfortable about this, but knows he can't say anything now. Eleven, however, does.

"Gone?"

"Yeah, the black hole... It got her. And, somehow... I've just been scared, you know... That it'll take you too." The big bad policeman is actually tearing up. Hell, Tanner is too just listening.

"I guess that's why I get so mad... I'm so sorry, kid... It's so..."

"Stupid." Eleven finishes with a smile.

Hopper chuckles. "Stupid."

Eleven reaches across to take his hand.

"I've been stupid too."

Hopper grins.

"Then I guess we broke our rule."

It's Eleven's turn to giggle.

"I don't hate it, by the way... This whole... Look. It's kinda cool."  
Hopper concedes with a smile.

"Bitchin'." Eleven says.

"Okay, sure. Bitchin'."

## **8. Chapter 8 - Ghost and the Machine**

### **Chapter 8 – Ghost and the Machine**

The boys emerge in a good deal less than five minutes wearing suits of Initiate training armour – as promised, the armoury had been fully stocked. The Lord Paladin looks them up and down critically.

"Weapons?" He demands.

"Glock '106, sir." Tanner responds. Both boys are holding the latest iteration of the slim gamma rifle.

Ghost nods, the gesture neither approving nor disapproving. "Throwables?"

"Two flash, two heat, one explosive." This time Trent answers, tapping the five grenades clipped to his vest.

Ghost nods again. "Point blank?"

Neither boy replies. His face still impartial, the Lord Paladin and ducks inside the armoury. He returns with two Electron Charge Batons, colloquially known as 'shock sticks', and hands one to each Initiate.

"More than half of your engagements will end in a point blank situation. Never forget your last resort." Ghost's words are a statement rather than a reproach. The boys mumble their thanks and slip the batons into their belts.

The Lord Paladin shuts the armoury door.

"Now, listen carefully. As you know, we are under attack by an unknown number of category nine beings originating from within the Rift. I have activated our distress beacon and the Watch Rangers are on the way. The plan is for them to enter on level six and fight downwards, clearing floors as per protocol. In the mean time, it is up to us to contain the hostile threat. Intelligence suggests the perimeter breach is somewhere in the disciplinary wing below us, so our mission is to proceed to level two, take back the main hall and secure

any survivors along the way. Is that clear, Initiates?"

The briefing was delivered in such a cool and succinct fashion that the Lord Paladin could simply have been reading aloud a dinner menu.

"Crystal clear, sir." Tanner responds.

This was it – real action. The stuff they had been training for, although in rather different circumstances than anticipated.

"I g-guess... I mean... Yes, sir." Trent is apparently not quite so enthralled.

"Fine. Stay behind me at all times and keep alert. Do not fire unless I give you permission."

With that, the Lord Paladin strides off down the corridor. The Initiates follow.

They reach the main stairwell without a hitch and Ghost leads the way downwards. The shaft bears significant signs of damage and there is very little light – the emergency illumination seems to have failed completely, save for the occasional flicker. The Lord Paladin growls under his breath; he's seen this before.

"The lights are failing because of temporal disturbance." He explains to the two Initiates. "The magnetic field interferes with electricity."

Tanner nods. Rift Science is a subject he's supposed to have a test on the very next day.

They make their way past two small landings and eventually arrive on level two. It's almost pitch black, and Ghost signals for the boys to switch on their weapon-mounted torches. When they do, the sight that meets their eyes is gruesome. The corridor is bathed in blood and thick black vines snake across the walls and ceiling.

The three fan out and head down the corridor. The Lord Paladin has both his pistols drawn now, the tiny lamps mounted on each throwing an eerie cone of light as he leads the way. Then, he freezes, and the boys do the same.

"Spore Mine." Ghost growls, gesturing up at the ceiling. Sure enough, high above them, a dome-shaped creature is stuck to the roof of the corridor. It *sucks* as if short of breath and drips a thick white liquid.

"Toast the bastard."

Tanner is the first to react to the order. He releases the safety on his weapon, raising it to his shoulder and flicking the output slider to a mid range-setting. He's suddenly nervous and it takes him a moment to line up the sights, but when he squeezes the trigger he knows his aim is true. There's a brief *fizzing* sound, then a *crackle* as the spore mine instantly shrivels on contact with the microwave rays. Then it explodes, showering the corridor floor with a mixture of red, green and white substances – Tanner's only thought is that it's utterly disgusting.

Ghost allows the dripping to cease, then continues down the passage without a word. Tanner follows, but not before receiving a fist bump from Trent. Sure, the creature in question may only be rated at category two, but it could still deliver a nasty acid burn if not properly neutralised. Hell, there were Rangers – Lancers that specialised in fighting creatures from the Rift – that had died to Spore Mines. A first kill was a moment to be savoured.

They make it to the end of the corridor, turn right and find themselves in the centre of the disciplinary wing – a large atrium, leading to various offices and isolation cells. Straight ahead of them is the large double door which leads to the Shock Box.

The boys exchange a look – this is not a good place. What was worse, there had been no sign of any more Cloverheads, and both consider it unlikely that the attack on the Academy had involved just one.

"Spread out, search the area." The Lord Paladin orders briskly. "Find a hostile, toast it. Find a survivor, bring them to me. We have five Squires from Squadron Uniform unaccounted for, plus Knight-Sergeant Julius."

"Yes sir."

"You got it, sir."

The Initiates split up and head for opposite sides of the hall. Ghost takes up a position behind the reception desk and covers the door though which they entered.

Tanner checks inside the first couple of cells and finds the doors locked tight – a quick look through the peephole reveals them to be empty. Then he comes to the third one; this door is damaged and swinging on its hinges. It seems to be bigger than the others, too – Tanner reckons it could be the Knight-Sergeant's quarters. Raising his rifle, he nudges the door open.

He's right. This room is much larger and the torch mounted on his weapon isn't powerful enough to illuminate all the way to the back. Without thinking, he steps further inside to get a better look, then something hits him from the side.

*Behind the door. Shit.*

He's knocked to the floor, instantly winded. The gamma gun slips out of his grasp and goes sliding away across the floor. Then the torch goes out. Darkness.

And just one sound.

*A slobber.*

Trent has just concluded his search fruitlessly when he hears his friend's cry. He sprints across the hall as fast as his genetically-modified legs will carry him – Ghost is not far behind, but age is not on his side and neither is DNA enhancement.

In fact, by the time he arrives, it's all over.

Trent has clinically dispatched the Cloverhead with a high-density blast from behind, reducing it to nothing more than a pile of *slobbering* ashes.

Ashes which now completely engulf Tanner, who sits up like some ancient mummy arising from its tomb and sneezes, blowing category nine everywhere. Trent stifles a chuckle.

"Thanks." Tanner mumbles, feeling around for his gamma gun. His

hand closes on it and he relights the torch, shining it into the corner.

"I think I've found Knight-Sergeant Julius."

"And the Squires." Trent adds, his voice suddenly hushed.

In the far corner there lies the half-eaten remains of the Discipline Sergeant. Behind him, in a similar state, were his young charges, and by his side was a fully-extended shock stick. He had been trying to protect them.

"Julius was a good man." The Lord Paladin says quietly, after a while. "The Academy is poorer for his loss."

"Sir... I only count four Squires." Tanner says. "Isn't there be one more?"

Ghost nods. "There were five housed in disciplinary quarters."

"Then where's the other one?" Trent asks.

Right on cue, there's a cry from somewhere outside. Although barely audible, it's perceptible to the enhanced senses of Tanner, and he leads the way back into the hall.

"I think it's coming from the Shock Box." Trent says.

Sure enough, the cry rings out again – louder, this time, and definitely originating from behind the double doors at the far end of the atrium.

"Go and retrieve him." Ghost retakes his position behind the desk.

Tanner and Trent need no second invitation. They approach the doors and flank them, one either side. Trent pulls the pin from one of his flashbang grenades and, opening his side a crack, tosses it inside.

Tanner counts down. "Three, two, one."

**\*CRUMP\***

It ignites on the other side, the sound muffled. Trent grins.

"Open, sesame."

Together they kick the doors open and enter, weapons raised.

The room is large and vaulted, its walls painted a dour grey and lined with various ducts and cables. To their right, visible in the flicker of the red emergency lighting, is a bank of computers mounted on a console. The Shock Box itself sits in the centre of the room and consists of a huge plexiglas cube, mounted on a concrete plinth. Each clear pane is edged with metal joints, which are in turn connected to a system of wires leading to the control panel. At the end of the cube nearest to the two Initiates there is a gull-wing-style door, sealed shut.

And in front of that, is the problem.

A Cloverhead is gnawing and clawing at the reinforced surface, apparently trying to get at the boy contained within. He recognises the yellow trim on his t-shirt as designating a Squire of Squadron Uniform – which puts him at roughly age eight.

*The Squadron that'll never be deployed.*

**\*BZZZZZZT\***

Tanner jumps at the sound right next to him. He turns and sees Trent striding forward, smoking gamma gun still pressed to his shoulder. The Cloverhead somehow manages to turn and form an impossible expression of reptilian surprise, before crumpling lifelessly to the floor.

**\*BZZZT\* \*BZZZT\* \*BZZZT\***

Trent sinks three more low-density blasts into the monster, disfiguring it.

Tanner puts a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Easy tiger, I think it's dead now."

Trent turns and grins. "Two cat nines to me, one cat two to you. And that Spore Mine was about to die of old age, anyway."

Tanner chuckles and turns his attention to the boy trapped inside the Shock Box. He's still pressed up against the back of the cube, eyes wide with fear.

"It's okay." Tanner says, then realises the plexiglass is soundproof.

"We're here to get you out." He mimes.

*Probably safer to stay in there.*

Trent moves to the control panel and goes to lay his hand on the computer, but Tanner stops him.

"Ask Ghost for his code."

"Why?" Trent asks.

*Because think of the fun we can have with it when all this is over.*

"Blowing the circuits might not be safe with him in there." Tanner points at the boy, who's still watching them warily from the back of the cube.

"Good point." Trent heads back to the door.

"Lord Paladin, sir? We need your keycode! We found the kid, but he's trapped in here."

Ghost replies without looking over his shoulder. "Four-one-nine-six-five-seven."

"Thank you, sir!" Trent heads back to the console and inputs the numbers. There's a *hiss* and the door begins to rise. The boy doesn't move.

Tanner moves to the entrance and steps inside.

"Hey, kiddo! We're here to get you out." His voice echoes loudly around the plastic chamber.

Still, the boy doesn't move.

"Hey, don't be scared." Aware of the reverberations, this time he

speaks more softly as he slowly approaches the Squire. The boy is pressed tight against the wall and, as he closes in, Tanner hears his breathing is fast and irregular.

"Hey, it's okay, you're safe now. The monster's gone. It's dead, see?"

This seems to draw a response, however slight. Tanner presses on. "We're going to look after you, I promise, but I need you to come out of here - can you do that for me?"

The boy gives a tiny nod. Ever-so-slowly, he moves away from the wall and approaches Tanner, casting fearful glances around the room.

"I promise I won't let those things hurt you, okay?"

Another nod, this time more perceptible.

"There you go, just a few more steps. What's your name? You're from Squadron Uniform, right?"

"Y-y-yes... M-m-my... My name's S-s-squire Ulysses..." The boy stutters quietly, then spots the Initiate rank insignia on Tanner's epaulettes. "...S-s-sir..."

"Alright then Ulysses, let's get you out of here. I'm Tan, by the way. You can drop the 'sir'."

Tanner gently places his arm across the Squire's shoulders and guides him outside. Ulysses doesn't resist, and Tanner can feel the boy trembling against him – he wonders if his terror was caused by the Cloverhead attack, or is in fact a product of the Shock Box. The machine administers physiological punishment rather than physical, and works by delivering a series of mild electric shocks to the occupant at seemingly random intervals. This creates a feeling of fear, and is one of the more brutal but effective methods of instilling the Academy's military discipline upon the members of the Alphabet program.

"Trent, meet Ulysses. Ulysses, this is Trent." Trent turns back from the computer at his friend's voice.

"Howdy-dooddy, Ulysses." He exclaims. The boy's face breaks into a

smile at this. "Here, I found your gear." He hands the Squire a pair of boots and a yellow-trimmed jacket. The boy is barefoot and wearing only shorts and t-shirt – standard for the Shock Box – and he puts them on gratefully

"Right, let's get out of here." Tanner leads the way back towards the double doors, but then something makes him stop. Suddenly, he presses a hand to his temple.

"Urgh..."

Trent recognises the signs. "What is it, Tan?"

This time, Tanner is able to manage his Sixth Sense much better. He lowers his hand and explains, mindful of their young and very frightened companion.

"We need to go. Now."

Trent doesn't need telling twice. He grabs Ulysses' arm and crashes through the double doors, making a beeline for where Ghost is standing sentry.

"Sir!" Tanner shouts from close behind.

The Lord Paladin turns and sees Ulysses with them. "Good work, Initiates."

They reach him and Tanner lowers his voice. "Sir, there's more coming. A whole lot more. I just sensed them, sir, I couldn't..."

Ghost waves a hand for him to slow down. "Did you see how many?"

Tanner shakes his head. "No sir, I couldn't tell..."

"What category?" Ghost cuts him off.

"I'm sorry, sir..."

The Lord Paladin pauses for a moment, then jogs over to the door for a look down the corridor. He ducks back inside quickly.

"It seems you sensed correctly." He growls.

Tanner wishes he hadn't sensed correctly.

"We can't stay here." Ghost sets off the way the boys had come, back towards the Shock Box chamber. The sound of many heavy footsteps is audible from the corridor.

"Inside, quickly." The Lord Paladin holds the doors open for the others, before stepping through and bolting them shut behind him. He turns and eyes the Shock Box

"We'll hold this room." He announces grimly. "Everyone find a firing position."

Grimly, the Initiates find cover – Trent crouches behind the Shock Box itself, while Tanner ducks behind the computer console with Ulysses in tow. He runs his hand through the younger boy's untidy blond curls.

"Like I said, I won't let them hurt you."

Ulysses is obviously making a huge effort to remain calm and nods vigorously, scooting in closer to the Tanner who manages a reassuring smile in return.

"Stay behind me and we'll be fine."

Ghost finishes constructing his own cover from an overturned table and draws his pistols. He checks the magazines are fully loaded, then twirls them on his fingertips.

"Control your fire. Short, focused bursts only. If they find us, they will likely try to overwhelm us through sheer weight of numbers. Conserve your cells and communicate your reloads. Tanner, do you have any more information?"

Tanner places a hand to his temple again – he's getting quite adept at this. It takes him just a moment to reconnect with his Sixth Sense, then another to phase out. "They're in the hall, sir... I can feel... Twenty category nines, maybe more... And there's something else... Something bigger, sir."

"Twenty." Ghost scowls at the thought. "That's too many to have wandered in by chance."

**\*BOOM\***

There's a loud noise as something impacts the doors. They quiver on their hinges, but there's no visible damage Tanner can see.

"Ready?" The Lord Paladin suddenly seems almost nonchalant as he spins his magazines, Russian Roulette style.

**\*BANG\***

Something bigger hits the door. This time, they buckle a little. Dust trickles down from the surrounding frame.

"Give them hell, boys."

**\*CRASH\***

The doors give way in a cacophony amplified by the enclosed space and the occupants of the Shock Box chamber rise to their feet, weapons levelled. The two Cloverheads that had been battering in the door jerk their heads upwards in surprise, then are promptly dispatched by a two high-density gamma gun blasts from the Initiates.

Ghost nods approvingly, before dispatching the third category nine through the door with a precise volley from his revolvers. Things are going well.

Then the emergency lights go out.

"That's not possible..." The Lord Paladin growls. The backup lighting is provided by a chemical reaction and shouldn't be affected by electrical interference. In the darkness, Tanner feels Ulysses moving even closer and gives the boy's shoulder a squeeze.

"Incoming!" Trent's yell is accompanied by a blast from his gamma gun, frying the latest Cloverhead through the door. There are instantly two more in its place however, and two more in theirs, and then the monsters begin to gain ground.

A magazine later, Ghost is forced to abandon his position. Under covering fire from the two Initiates, he falls back to join a hastily reloading Trent. Then, it's Tanner's turn to be pinned down – he can't get his shots off quick enough, and would have been dinner for an enterprising category nine if the Lord Paladin hadn't emptied his revolvers into the Cloverhead in question.

"Sir! What do we do?" Trent evaporates the head of the closest monster. The lack of light is making things difficult – the only illumination now comes from their weapon-mounted torches.

"Keep toasting the bastards, there can't be many more!" Ghost holsters his smoking pistols, ammunition fully expended, and cracks a glow stick. Then he flings it down and reaches over his shoulder, drawing the legendary Paladin broadsword from its sheath. He extends it with a flourish, blue sparks of electricity crackling along the blade as its linkages snap home and solidify. Raising it above his head and dropping into a low stance, he lops the limbs from the nearest Cloverhead and slices away its jaws with a single blow.

Tanner suddenly realises why the Lord Paladin is so keen on point blank weapons.

They fight their way to the rear of the chamber until all are standing back to back, Ulysses protected in the middle. Although the two Initiates keep on blasting and Ghost is racking up an almighty toll, it seems hopeless – the Cloverheads just keep on coming, many taking several hits to go down.

"Sir, where are all these coming from?" Tanner uses the butt of his weapon to dislodge a dying category nine before it can strike with its terrifying jaws.

"You tell me, Initiate!" Ghost yells back mid-swing.

To his credit, Tanner tries, but he can't seem to focus on his Sixth Sense – possibly something to do with the hideous flesh-eating monsters trying to kill him. Then again, the skill is meant for combat, but as yet he's received no training in its use – he just isn't ready.

*\*Fizz\**

The sound his weapon makes is mocking.

*Shit. Out of charge.*

He scrambles to snap in a new cell, but his hand finds the cartridge pouch on his belt disturbingly *empty*. A swift glance confirms his fears.

"I'm out!"

Tanner discards his now-useless gamma gun and reaches for the shock stick on his belt. He deftly flicks it to full extension and presses the button on the handle, high-voltage electricity instantly humming along its full length. He strikes out at the nearest Cloverhead and it jumps back at the touch.

"I'm on my last cell!" Trent reports from his side, his voice strained. They've put up a valiant fight, but surely this is it. They can't compete against the sheer weight of numbers – as Ghost had predicted, they're being overwhelmed, and without ranged weapons they have no chance.

"Stay close to me!" The Lord Paladin yells, his broadsword scything so fast its blade is no more than a blur. He's cutting a veritable swathe through the oncoming hordes of Cloverheads, but it's still not enough – not nearly.

*This is it. This is where it ends. I don't even make it to the Rift.*

Tanner can barely believe how quickly the evening had deteriorated. Yesterday he was in the simulator. Tomorrow he was supposed to be sitting his written tests. It just didn't make sense.

"Aaaaaaagh!"

Trent takes a bite on the left arm. The teeth don't fully connect, but it takes out a fair chunk of flesh. The Initiate sinks three charges into the monster in question before reaching for the aid spray on his belt. Shaking it, he applies the liquid liberally to his arm and resumes blasting as the skin begins to knit itself shut.

"Shit!" He exclaims after just seconds, staring down at his weapon

disbelievingly. "I'm out too!"

Trent throws it to the floor and tries to draw his own shock stick, but too late; a Cloverhead knocks him down. The Lord Paladin is there in a flash to protect him, but leaves his side unguarded in the process, and Tanner is sorely outnumbered. Then, disaster – one of the monsters seizes his baton and sends it flying away in the dark. The Initiate feels sharp jaws brush his shoulder and strikes out instinctively, his fist touching cold, scaly skin. His first thought is for Ulysses – he can no longer defend him. Looking over his shoulder, he sees Trent and Ghost almost buried beneath category nines too – all he can hope for now is that it's quick.

And then there's a shout.

The voice is unmistakable.

*"Crackerjack! Everybody down!"*

Tanner pushes Ulysses to the floor and hits the deck. Despite the cries of the Cloverheads, he can just make out the *whizz* as the L184 'Crackerjack' pulse grenade deploys its firing head and then the *pop* as the detonator slides home.

However, nothing can prepare him for the force that follows.

He swears he sees a Cloverhead go flying over his head, blown clean off its feet.

The shockwave is at waist height and powerful enough to shake the concrete walls, but the grenade's real purpose is its EMP – powerful enough to knock out every category nine in the room.

Which it does.

The dust settles for a moment, and then inexplicably, the emergency lights come back on. Tanner rolls over painfully and sits up.

Standing in the doorway, silhouetted in the eerie red glow, are three figures, each decked out in Lancer battle armour and carrying a late model gamma weapon. In the centre is Initiate Tailor.

"What... You're... Here?" Tanner struggles to his feet, still groggy and unable to speak coherently.

"Damn right, I'm here. What in Grumman's name happened to coming straight back?" Tailor strides towards him.

"Well, I'm sorry... Mom." Tanner grins.

A moment later, Tailor's stony expression collapses into a laugh and they embrace. Then, she spots Trent, buried beneath a lifeless Cloverhead, and goes to help him up.

"I can't leave you boys alone for five minutes."

That's when Tanner registers who her companions are. He looks at them in disbelief.

*Squire Tomlin and Squire Tinker.*

"Tom? Tink?"

"Good to see ya, Tan." Tinker smiles and comes over to hug his old friend. Tomlin follows and does the same. They haven't seen each other in over a year.

"Guess this mess is what it takes for us to hang out without the 'ol Lordy... Lord... Lord Paladin..." Tomlin's remark dies on his lips as he sees the person he was going to insult digging himself out from underneath an incapacitated category nine.

"You... You... He..." Tinker stabs a finger in the direction of Ghost, then of Tanner.

"What can I say." Tanner chuckles. "I'm *that* good."

"Pah!" Tomlin snorts. "He needed you as a meatshield is all."

Tanner grins and goes to help up a coughing Ulysses.

"Initiate, Squires, we are indebted to you." Ghost brushes himself off and sheaths his broadsword. "Tell me, what are you doing down here? And where did you get this equipment?" He gestures to their

Lancer combat gear.

"I'm from Tanner and Trent's dormitory, sir." Tailor speaks up. "When they didn't come back from level three I went looking. I found these two in a classroom with a dead security team on my way down, so we tooled up and here we are."

"I see. Well, normally of course I would discipline you for the unauthorised use of weapons, but, with the situation as it is, and with the state of the disciplinary wing, I suppose thanks are in order." Ghost eyes the state of the Shock Box chamber ruefully. It's almost knee deep in Cloverhead bodies.

Tailor, Tomlin and Tinker decide to take this as a compliment.

"Thank you, sir."

"Very kind, sir."

"Now, we must move quickly – we cannot afford to be here when these creatures wake up. Your weapon, Squire." Ghost takes the gamma rifle from Tinker, who waits until the Lord Paladin has his back turned before rolling his eyes.

*'Course he took mine.*

Tanner stifles a chuckle. His old friend still has that huge chip on his shoulder.

"Now, follow me – one weapon at the front, the other at the back. Move."

Following Ghost's command, Tailor moves to the rear of the column as the boys snap to obey. Led by the Lord Paladin, they make their way out of the chamber and into the main hall. All seems clear.

Then, an almighty roar.

A fatal moment of indecision.

Half of the group split one way, half the other. Ghost, Trent and Tanner move to the left of the room and take cover in one of the

offices, while Tailor, Tomlin, Tinker and Ulysses dart to the right and hide behind a pile of boxes. And not a moment too soon, as a horrendous monstrosity waddles around the corner and enters the hall.

It's like a Cloverhead, but bigger. Much bigger. In fact, it's massive. The same horrific set of jaws, the same spindly upper limbs and the same stocky lower legs – just four times as big. Tanner finds himself comparing it to the picture of a prehistoric Tyrannosaurus Rex that used to adorn his nursery wall. On its head, however, there is a difference – a strange, pulsating, circular blue organ is perched there, not unlike a crown.

It raises its dripping maw to the ceiling again and bellows a bloodcurdling cry. Tanner sees Tailor put a comforting arm around Ulysses on the other side of the room and ducks back inside.

Ghost sneaks a look himself, then wishes he hadn't. The monster had been looking straight at him. Cursing, he slides back the cartridge cover on his gamma gun, checks the cell contained within, then snaps it shut.

"Stay here." He growls to Tanner and Trent, who had been planning on doing just that anyway.

"Sir... What is that thing?" Trent whispers back. He's never seen anything like it.

Ghost doesn't reply for a moment, framed in the office door as he holds up three fingers in signal to the others on the opposite side of the hall. When he finally responds, the answer's chilling.

"I've only seen one once before... And that was deep inside the Rift. It's a King Cloverhead."

*At least that explains the crown.*

Tanner doesn't know what's worse; the abomination outside, or the fact he doesn't have a clue how to fight it. There's no time to ask any further questions, however, as The Lord Paladin is gone.

Ghost steps outside, his weapon raised and set to full charge. On the

other side of the room, Tanner sees Tailor and Tomlin standing up behind the crates, gamma guns levelled at the beast.

"*Futurum est victima!*" Ghost yells the war cry of the Riftwalkers and expends his entire cell into the King Cloverhead. Opposite, Tailor and Tomlin do the same. There's a sudden, brilliant flash of blue-tinged light, and Tanner is blinded momentarily. He ducks back into the darkness of the office and waits for his vision to return to normal – when it does, he sees the Lord Paladin there too, and he's shocked to see a hint of fear on the old man's face.

A blink later, the expression had vanished, and the Lord Paladin turns to the Initiates. "It's at stage seven. Capable of enhanced energy dispersal. Category twelve."

"Sir?"

Despite his detailed education on the various weaponry of the Rift dwellers, Tanner had never heard of this before.

"It's immune to our energy weapons." Ghost snaps, wishing for the umpteenth time he had bullets in his revolvers.

There's a roar from outside. The King Cloverhead is attacking the others. Tomlin seems to be trying to distract the monster from the others and is standing in the middle of the hall, desperately fumbling with his gamma gun and trying to get a new cell snapped in place.

The vast creature approaches and Tomlin abandons his efforts, opting instead to make a run for it. In a moment of what seems like genius, he hits the deck and slides between the monster's legs, but this is no normal category nine. It swiftly stamps down with one of its huge bipedal limbs and catches Tomlin squarely on the leg. There's a horrific crunching sound and Tanner feels sick.

The Squire sits up and tries to move, but it's no good – his leg is shattered. The beast seems to realise this and turns around slowly, lowering its maw until it's inches from Tomlin's face. The petals of its jaw begin to open, showering the helpless Squire with reptilian saliva.

Tanner turns to Trent frantically. "We have to do something!"

Trent mind is blank. "Like what?"

"I don't know, but if we don't think of something that electricity-sucking bastard is gonna eat Tomlin!"

Tanner's choice of words give Trent an idea. "Electricity... Shorting the circuits... That's it... We have to get it in the Shock Box!"

"What do you mean, Initiate?" Ghost demands.

"I'm not sure exactly how that... Thing... Works, but I reckon it uses the same biotech that my Electro skill does... And if we can just overload it with current..."

"Weren't you listening, Initiate? Electricity doesn't bother it!" Ghost cuts him off.

"Microwave guns work on the principle of high-voltage charges cooking the target from the inside out – so what if we use current to..." Trent is again cut off by a shriek from outside. The King Cloverhead is literally seconds from devouring Tomlin. There's no more time to explain.

"Hey! Over here!"

Trent dashes out the office, yelling at the top of his voice. The monster jerks round to look at him, its helpless prey momentarily forgotten. Tailor takes the opportunity to poke her head out and unleash another burst from her gamma gun, but the monster barely even notices.

"What's he doing?" Ghost growls.

"Saving Tomlin's life." Tanner sprints out after his friend.

"Hey, this way!" Trent is standing in front of the doors to the Shock Box, waving his hands in the air frantically. Tanner motions for Tailor to hold fire and look after Tomlin, before joining his friend at the doors.

"I hope you know what you're doing!" Tanner yells above another almighty roar from the creature.

"So do I!" Trent replies, kicking open the doors and heading inside.

The sight of the incapacitated Cloverheads seems to drive the massive beast into a frenzy and it begins a charge towards them, head lowered and jaws gnashing. Tanner has a minor panic as he realises it won't fit through the doors, but he needn't have worried – the King Cloverhead smashes straight through the doorframe, leaving a monster-shaped hole.

Trent is already at the control panel for the shock box, but disaster – it's damaged.

*Must have been a stray blast from a gamma gun.*

"Computer's fried. I can't activate the Shock Box."

Trent knows what he has to do. It's like, deep down, he knew he'd have to take this action all along. And, strangely, for the first time he feels no fear – only a sensation of *purpose* inside.

He turns to Tanner, pushing his friend to the floor behind the computer console.

"There's another way. Stay down. Whatever you hear, whatever you see, don't you *dare* move for anything."

"What... What are you going to do?" Tanner has a horrible feeling he already knows.

"Take care... Make it into the Rift for me. And look after Tailor!" Trent's face suddenly bears a smile. Blue sparks of electricity have begun to crackle at his fingertips.

"No, Trent, don't do it!" Tanner yells, but it's already too late.

"Oi, scaly! Over here!"

Trent darts out from behind the console and dives headlong into the Shock Box. The monster lets out a howl of rage and rams its head in

through the open hatch. Trent crawls to the back, still waving his arms and shouting – his voice now inaudible through the plexiglass. The King Cloverhead's legs windmill as it tries to force its stocky body in through the door, and finally it succeeds. Sensing it has Trent trapped, its jaws begin to open.

Staring death itself in the face, Trent's grin doesn't falter for a second. Tanner can only watch as his friend reaches for his shock stick and pushes the button on its handle. He sees him place both hands on the baton and can barely watch as the sparks fly - the weapon glows brighter and brighter as Trent uses his power to increase the current. Then, just as the King Cloverhead raises back its head to strike the final blow, the Initiate jams the weapon into one of the metal ribs of the Shock Box.

The effect is stunning.

A blue shockwave erupts inside the plexiglass chamber. Sparks seem to swirl around inside, and it reminds Tanner a little of the Rift simulations. But then the colours turn to red with a greenish tinge, and he can watch no longer.

Gradually, as the smoke begins to clear and the liquids that splatter the inside of the Shock Box run downwards in trails, Tanner can see the results of his friend's brave sacrifice. The carcass of the King Cloverhead is there – at least, most of it is, for the head seems to have vaporised entirely. But of Initiate Trent, there is no sign, save for the blackened and twisted remains of his shock stick.

"Trent... Trent, NO!" Tanner is on his feet in an instant, running to the box and hammering on the side with both fists. He circles around to the hatch but finds it locked – the immense electrical surge must have triggered the bolts. He kicks it as hard as he can but, unsurprisingly, it doesn't budge.

"Tan... What happened? What's going on?" It's Tailor bursting through the double doors, her shirt covered in blood. Tanner assumes is Tomlin's.

"Trent... He... He was in there..." He can't bring himself to say it. Tailor follows her friend's gaze through the clear walls of the Shock

Box and sees the splattered remains of the King Cloverhead.

"Oh... My Grumman..." Tailor murmurs.

She closes her eyes for a second, then opens them again.

"He's at peace."

She seems to steel herself. "Trent... He sacrificed himself to save us... Look, your friend Tomlin has lost a lot of blood...Without proper medical attention, he won't last much longer. We need to move."

Tanner nods, knowing she's right. He turns away from the grisly contents of the Shock Box and his training kicks in.

"Right, let's get out of here."

Together, both Initiates leave the chamber and jog to where a very pale Tomlin is lying. Tanner gives Tailor his can of aid spray and she swiftly expends the whole thing on the Squire's wounds, but such are their severity it makes little difference. He's drifting in and out of consciousness now, and Tanner can't quite bring himself to look at his old friend's leg.

"Initiates, you'll need to carry him." The Lord Paladin informs them. The fact that Tailor had returned only with Tanner told him all he needed to know.

"The Rangers should have arrived by now. Chances are they have already made it to level four. That's where we need to go."

Tanner and Tailor nod wordlessly and hoist Tomlin up, supporting him between them. His leg has been immobilised with an improvised splint, but he moans in pain at the movement. Tailor closes her eyes for a moment and tries to ease his suffering, but she's starting to tire – it's been a long night.

They make their way out of the hall and head down the corridor whence they'd come, stepping over the vines that continue to grow even as they go by. Ghost is in the lead, brandishing a gamma gun; followed by Ulysses, then the stretcher party; then Tinker with the other weapon that remained serviceable. As they pass underneath the

dead spore mine and a wave of grief sweeps over Tanner, but he suppresses it for now - there would be time enough to mourn Trent later. Right now, they have to focus on getting out alive, and getting Tomlin medical attention.

**\*Screeeeeeeeee\***

A strange cry echoes from somewhere further up the corridor. It's definitely not human. Ghost motions for the group to press on, which they do, until they round a corner and come face to face with a pair of Cloverheads.

The two monsters are locked in mortal combat and don't even notice the arrival of the humans. It's as if they've lost all purpose, or gone insane.

"Get out of my Academy."

The Lord Paladin throws up his gamma gun and unleashes two high-density bursts, disintegrating both of the horrific creatures, before carrying on down the corridor. The others follow.

They are nearing the staircase when they first hear the sounds of another battle – likely a much larger one. Ghost raises his fist for the others to stop, then moves forward alone to check it out. Rounding the last corner, it seems as though the entire remaining force of category nines has congregated at the foot of the stairs and turned upon one another. It's a brutal twenty-way fight to the death.

The Lord Paladin assesses the situation and comes to the conclusion there is no way past, then returns to the others. "It seems the remainder of the category nine Rift dwellers have become frenzied in the absence of their king. The stairs are completely blocked. We'll have to chance the elevators."

They retrace their steps a few dozen yards and arrive at the lift shafts. Ghost keys in his passcode, then curses under his breath – the power is still out and the doors are inoperative.

*This is when Trent would've come in handy.* Tanner thinks sadly.

"Stand well back."

The Lord Paladin raises his weapon and takes aim at the keypad. When he lets fly, the results are rather more dramatic than anticipated – the entire wall panel explodes with a *bang*. From further up the corridor, the sound of fighting abruptly stops.

Tailor and Tanner exchange a look.

"Sir?"

Ghost discards the gamma gun and draws his broadsword, the metal glinting dangerously in the flickering red glow of the emergency lighting. He slides the blade in between the gap in the doors and applies full force. Now that the maglocks are disabled, the doors take only a little persuasion and slowly slide open on their rails. There's the sound of many heavy footsteps uncomfortably close by.

The Lord Paladin turns to the others. "Everybody, inside."

They don't need to be told twice. Ulysses is pushed in first, then Tailor and Tanner pile in, still supporting Tomlin who is now completely out cold. Last in is Tinker, still brandishing his gamma gun.

"Sir! Get inside!" Tanner yells.

The Lord Paladin is still standing outside the door, wielding his mighty broadsword in both hands.

"Release the counterweight! The lift will take you upstairs to safety. I'll buy you some ti..."

Ghost is unable to complete his sentence as the first Cloverhead reaches him. Although he's able to parry its gnashing jaws, the sheer force of the attack knocks the old man down like a ton of bricks. He's all but defenceless.

Inside the elevator, Tinker sighs heavily.

"Looks like it's my turn to do something stupid."

He snaps closed the cartridge cover on his gamma gun and steps outside, weapon raised to his shoulder.

Tanner is ashamed to say he's shocked at what happens next – three Cloverheads are sent flying backwards by Tinker's first three shots.

*He hit something. He actually hit something.*

Tinker's lack of ability when it came to marksmanship was the running joke for almost the entire Squadron. This was the main reason he had not been selected for the Initiate program, and instead was training to become a Lancer rather than a Paladin or Ranger – most likely a desk job, too.

Tinker spins on the spot, then sinks a charge into the Cloverhead on top of the Lord Paladin. He reloads with amazing speed, his hands moving so fast it's difficult to see the new cell going in.

"Sir! Get in the elevator! Now!"

There's a note of command in the Squire's voice unfamiliar to Tanner. Ghost seems to have been caught off guard too, as he obeys and scrambles inside.

Tinker begins to retreat back to the lift, still blasting away. Two, three, four more Cloverheads fall, but he knows he's running low on ammunition – they have to get away. He lets loose one last charge, then dives headfirst into the elevator. Tailor punches the counterweight release button she has exposed behind a maintenance hatch, and, released of its gravitational draw, the lift begins to trundle upwards. The category nines realise what's going on and make a last push to get inside, but too late – the humans have made their escape. There's a moment of disbelieving, breathless silence.

"Tink, where the Grumman did you learn to shoot like that?" Tanner chuckles.

"What can I say, I'm a late bloomer." Tinker replies, a huge smile plastered across his face.

**\*Creaaaaak\***

The lift abruptly grinds to a stop.

Ghost looks around in confusion. "That's... Not possible..."

**\*Bang\***

The shaft doors fly open and the occupants of the elevator are blinded by the light of nine weapon-mounted torches.

"*Tiberius?* Is that you, *amigo?*"

The voice is warm and heavily-accented. As one, the torches are turned away, and its owner is visible – a man, short and squat, with his long grey hair swept back into a ponytail. He wears the battered combat leathers of a Ranger, but with the addition of two flamboyant bandoliers of cellular ammunition flung across his shoulders. On his feet, instead of the usual combat boots, he wears an old pair of red sneakers, and his brown eyes twinkle in the ceiling lights – which seem to be back on up here, Tanner notes.

"It's good to see you, Heurelho."

Ghost does something Tanner didn't know he was capable of – smile – and steps out of the lift, where the two men embrace.

"Ah, it has been too long, my friend!" The Ranger declares heartily.

"It's a shame we couldn't do this under more pleasant circumstances." The Lord Paladin agrees. "Initiates, Squires, meet Captain Heurelho Hawke – one of our most decorated Rangers."

The others don't need telling who this man is. 'Heinous' Hawke was nothing short of legendary, and you'd be hard pushed to find someone who hasn't heard of his daring exploits inside the Rift.

"An honour, sir." Tailor clambers out of the lift and steps forward to shake his hand. Instead of this, Hawke takes her hand and kisses it with a little bow.

"*Encantado, señorita.*"

Tanner could have sworn he saw Tailor blushing.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but my friend here is badly wounded. Can you help us get him medical attention?" Tinker is straight to the point as he helps Tanner carry Tomlin out of the elevator.

"*Dios mío*, of course *señor*! Corporal Paváliná here is our *medicó*."

Corporal Paváliná, a dark-haired man in his mid-twenties, detaches himself from the group and quickly unfolds a collapsible stretcher. He motions for Tanner and Tinker to set Tomlin down upon it and, with the help of another Ranger, carries the injured Squire away. Ghost turns to his companions.

"Initiates, Squire, you should go with him. Myself and Captain Hawke have much to discuss."

Tanner is about to challenge this – he has a score to settle with the remainder of those Cloverheads – but Tailor lays her hand on his shoulder and whispers in his ear.

"Save it for the Rift, Tan. Your friend needs you right now. Let's go."

Tanner knows what she's doing – Empaths are incredibly persuasive. However, she's right, and reluctantly he joins his two friends.

"Oh, one last thing." Ghost adds. They turn.

"Your work tonight? It shall not be forgotten."

The three salute.

"Thank you, sir."

Then head off in the wake of Tomlin's stretcher. As they round a bend and the Lord Paladin disappears from sight, Tinker pipes up.

"D'ya think that means he'll let us off Rift Science tomorrow?"

It's a shit joke, but they've never laughed so hard.

## 9. Chapter 9 - Combat Mode

### Chapter 9 – Combat Mode

After the beyond-awkward journey, Tanner has never been so relieved when they finally arrive at the main gates of the Hawkins National Laboratory facility. From their planning session earlier, he understands that the source of the Rift is contained deep within the basement of the main complex. However, the place is supposed to be swarming with category five Rift dwellers, so that's where he comes in.

They reach a large car park and Hopper pulls up, shutting off the truck's engine and lights. He and Eleven get out and Tanner does the same – his eyes take a moment to adjust to the light of the full moon, a sight unfamiliar to him. Coming from a time when the globe is all but enveloped by the fog of the Rift, he's never seen the sky so clear before.

The building in front of them is even bigger than Tanner anticipated. He notes that almost all of the windows are dark, except for a few, where orange lights flash on and off at intervals. The scenario reminds him of the attack on the Academy, and he shivers despite the warm night.

"Okay kid, you're up." Hopper appears from the back of the truck, holding a pump-action ballistic shotgun, a ballistic assault rifle and Tanner's gamma gun. The latter he hands over. The Paladin checks it carefully, sliding a fresh cell into the breech.

"Alright then. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, go in without me."

The last part of this statement was purely for protocol's sake – Tanner has no intention of meeting a sticky end at the jaws of a few category fives. He can imagine the shit he'd get off Trent in the afterlife.

"Fifteen minutes? You sure that's all you'll need?" Hopper asks gruffly.

"I'm not planning on hanging around." Tanner straps the gamma gun to his back and picks up his helmet.

"See you shortly."

He starts off briskly in the direction of the laboratory. It looms high above him, evocative of some dark abomination from the Rift. He pulls on his helmet and watches the blue heads-up display initialise on the visor.

*"Welcome, Star-Paladin Tanner."*

"Hey, Siri."

*"How are you today?"*

Tanner reaches the building. He pulls a pair of gloves from his belt and puts them on.

"You know, so-so."

*"Anything I can do to help?"*

He places his hands on the wall.

"Yeah. Can we climb this?"

*"Just a sec, analysing."*

"Today would be nice."

*"Ascension possible. Calibrating your contact surfaces for optimum grip."*

There's a barely audible *whirring* and Tanner feels a tightening in his hands and feet.

*"Calibration complete."*

He takes a leap at the wall and grabs on. His gloves and boots stick to it like glue.

"Nice one, Siri."

*"I aim to please."*

Tanner begins the climb. The others had asked whether scaling the

building was really necessary, but he hasn't come this far to forget to 'fight down' – especially as the future of the human race is at stake. Anyhow, with his advanced equipment, he reaches the summit within minutes.

"Siri, I need to find a way in. Can you recommend a window?"

*"The one that's three to your left looks suitable."*

He shuffles sideways. On the other side of the plate glass is an empty office – it does indeed look suitable.

"Switch to night vision."

*"Image intensification initialised."*

"Deploy mask."

*"Mask activated."*

Tanner loves his suit. The 'mask' gadget is particularly clever – it takes advantage of the reliance of Rift dwellers on sense of smell by emitting a series of scents cunningly designed to confuse them.

"Breach, breach, breach."

Grabbing hold of some steel guttering, he takes a swing at the window and smashes through with a loud **\*crash\***. His armour protects him from injury, although he does feel a slight twinge in his injured leg.

"Let's see if that brings a few this way."

*"Sensors report one category five being incoming."*

Tanner knows that one of those sensors is in fact himself – the helmet interfaces with the chip embedded at the base of his neck, providing the computer with access to his Sixth Sense. The information passed on is rudimentary at best, but easier than trying to drift in and out in battle.

**\*Bang\***

The door slams open and a cat five scampers in, raising its hideous maw and hissing upon sight of Tanner. He had hoped at this point it would go for backup and bring its friends back with it, but instead the monstrosity bares its teeth and flings itself at him. Sighing, The Paladin calmly unslings his gamma rifle and dispatches it in mid air, before moving to the doorway and looking up and down the corridor. He hopes the Reanimator had been watching.

*"Ten plus category five beings incoming on your position."* Siri informs him. Tanner grins inside his helmet. Indeed it had.

"Go to combat mode."

*"Combat mode engaged."*

**\*Screeeeeeeeech\***

The first cat five hoves into view, scuttling at full pelt on all fours. They hadn't had a name for these creatures at the Academy since they were just juvenile Cloverheads, but as he watches it approach, he thinks of a good one – *Crawler*.

*"Left."* Siri announces the direction of the closest monster. Tanner shoots it.

*"Right. Left. Left."*

Three more dead Crawlers.

*"Left. Left. Right. Left. Right. Right. Left. Shoulder."* At the last call Tanner spins and drops to one knee, expending his final charge into the category five behind him.

"How did that get there?"

Stepping back into the office, he has the answer straight away.

"Oh. I see."

There's a grating in the ceiling hanging wide open. The creatures must be using the building's air ducts to move around.

"Crafty little shits, eh Siri?"

*"Whatever you say."*

Tanner chuckles at the AI's reply. There's times when it sounds like a grumpy teenager. He wonders whether it's built that way to make him feel more at home.

*"Sensors report no further beings within detection range."*

"Okay?"

He dips into the Sixth Sense himself for a moment just to make sure, but Siri's right – there's no sign of more category fives. This makes him uneasy – he'd have thought there'd be more.

With a shrug, Tanner sets off down the corridor. He briefly discusses the best route with Siri, makes use of his helmet's X-ray filter, then takes a left and begins his descent of the rear service stairwell. On the way down he encounters a dead security guard, empty ballistic assault rifle by his side, but no more Crawlers – and by the time he reaches the lobby the ground floor, he's positively uncomfortable. He spots Hopper and Eleven waiting nervously outside the glass front doors and beckons for them to enter, touching a button on the side of his helmet to retract the visor.

"Any trouble?" Hopper asks as he makes his way inside.

"The building's clear down to ground level." Tanner replies. "But I can't help feeling there should be more of them."

"Don't sweat it, kid." Hopper growls, cocking his assault rifle. "They're probably waiting for us downstairs."

Tanner nods.

"Lead the way."

## 10. Chapter 10 - The Alignment

### Chapter 10 – The Alignment

Tanner waits in the darkness behind the curtain, looking out on stage. He shifts his feet nervously and watches as the promotion ceremony's enthusiastic host, Quincy Derringer, wraps up his interview with Tinker. Standing next to Tanner, Tailor takes his hand and gives it a little squeeze.

"You're gonna do great." She whispers. "Don't forget, they love you already. Just... Be yourself."

Tanner grimaces. "I still don't get why we have to do this stuff. We should be out there, making a difference."

"The Alignment isn't due for a few days yet, and there'll be plenty of time to toast Rifties then. But right now..." She pauses for a second to plant a quick kiss on his lips. "...The people want to meet their hero."

There's a loud cheer from the crowd in the Academy's vast auditorium as Derringer speaks.

"Thank you, Paladin Tinker. We're sure you'll..." He drops into a stage whisper. "...Set the Rift alight."

The audience howl with laughter.

"And now, it's time for our next guest..."

Tailor stands up straight and takes a quick breath in, then out. Tanner smiles and dusts off the spotless shoulders of her number one dress tunic, then leans in for another kiss, which she returns while shaking her head in mock exasperation.

"Ugh, boys."

"Have fun out there." Tanner knows she will.

"I'll be waiting for you." She runs a playful finger beneath his chin.

"Let's hear it for the one, the only... Paladin Taaaaaailor!" Derringer hams up her entrance even more than he had done for Tinker. Tanner feels a pang of pride as he watches Tailor stride confidently across the stage and warmly shake hands with the ceremony's illustrious frontman.

The next few minutes seem to pass in slow motion as Derringer begins by asking Tailor a few questions; what she likes to wear, what she likes to eat, what she likes to do in her spare time; then moves on to a chat about the Academy, about the Alphabet program; then provides a humorous commentary on a carefully-censored video montage of her training on the huge screen behind them. The crowd are loving it, 'ooh'-ing and 'ahh'-ing at the scenes where she's in nursery, then clapping as she's made a Squire and finally cheering when she makes Initiate. Tailor plays along, sharing a little joke with Derringer before relating a few light-hearted moments and pretending to cringe as he reads out her Squire pledges. Eventually though, it's time to end, and as a final question the host asks Tailor what becoming a Riftwalker means to her.

"Well," She answers, after a moment. "Of course, I feel so lucky to have the chance to really make a difference to our future."

Enthusiastic applause from the audience.

"But, what really does it for me is..." She pauses again. "...Getting to go in with Tanner. I'm just so proud of what he's become, he means so much to me and..."

The remainder of her answer is lost as the crowd go mental. Spotlights dart across the stage as Derringer says something to Tailor and embraces her warmly. She begins to make her way off the other side of the stage, stopping to give a little wave and acknowledge the rapturous ovation along the way. Just before disappearing from view behind the opposite curtain, she turns to give Tanner a little wink.

*Your turn.*

Tanner can't help but grin back.

After basking in the adoration for a few moments more, Derringer

dramatically motions for the audience to quieten down. Eventually, they do.

"Wow... What about that, ladies and gentlemen. What about that. But, now, the question is..." He pauses for dramatic effect.

"Do you want to meet him?"

Judging by the screams from the crowd, the answer is most definitely yes.

"Well then, ladies and gentlemen, it's your lucky day. It's the moment we've all been waiting for. Our final guest of the evening. It is my honour, my pleasure, my absolute *privilege* to introduce..."

The lights go down. The projector sputters into life and tense music begins to play over the speakers. On the vast screen behind Derringer, there's footage of a boy in full ceremonial armour kneeling before a leather-robed old man. It takes Tanner a second to realise who it is.

*It's me.*

And the old man is, of course, Lord Paladin Ghost. It's from his Paladinhood ritual, earlier that day.

*And is supposed to be a secret.*

*"Initiate Tanner, of Alphabet Squadron Tango, you kneel before me in this place of the sacred Grumman with the intent to rise a Paladin of Star and lead the Paladin Dozen. Is this so?"*

Ghost's words boom loud across the auditorium.

*"It is."*

*"Very well. Will you, Initiate Tanner, dedicate your life and blade to the preservation and protection of all mankind?"*

*"I will."*

*"And do you, Initiate Tanner, swear to sacrifice all for our future, no*

*matter what the cost?"*

*"I do."*

On the screen, the Lord Paladin raises his broadsword high above his head before bringing it down with a *clang* on the left shoulder of the boy. Sparks fly, the electricity from the blade safely carried away by the conductive armour, and Ghost does the same on the boy's right shoulder. Then, he speaks again.

*"Arise, Star-Paladin Tanner, Riftwalker and champion of humanity. Futurum est victima."*

The boy gets to his feet.

*"Futurum est victima."*

*"Futurum est victima!"*

The last part is chorused by a number of voices from somewhere off camera – Tanner knows they belong to all the other Initiates of Squadron Tango.

The footage fades and the lights come up. The speakers now blast out heroic music. The overhead lamps swing round to focus on the curtain he's standing behind.

*"...Staaaaaar... Palaaaaadin... Taaaaaaanner!"*

Tanner gulps.

And steps out.

The lights pick him up immediately.

He's like a rabbit in the headlights.

Then he sees Tailor on the other side of the stage.

She smiles.

He smiles back.

And the crowd go bananas.

"...And your face when Quincy called your name..."

Eleven of the twelve Paladins seated in the shuttle break down laughing as Tailor recounts the story of the presentation ceremony for the umpteenth time. Tanner, the twelfth, sits pouting with his arms folded, but eventually can't keep a straight face any longer and lets out a chuckle.

"Quincy', eh? On first name terms now are we? Is there something I should know, Tailor?"

There's a collective 'ooo' from the others. He *never* calls her Tailor.

"Well, I guess I do have something for you..." Tailor leans across and kisses him. There's a muffled cheer from everyone except Tinker, who feigns irritation.

"I've got to put up with these two lovebirds the whole bloody trip!"

Everyone laughs, then the shuttle hits turbulence and Tailor almost falls into Tanner's lap to another collective cheer.

"Ugh, Grumman help me!" Tinker curses with a smile.

The relationship between Tanner and Tailor dated back to just after the death of Trent – they'd been through a lot together. Of course, such things were strictly forbidden, but perhaps as a result of their part in defending the Academy the Lord Paladin had turned a rare blind eye to it. As deployment time neared both Initiates had concerns he would put a stop to it, but if anything, the scores of both had improved and – as demonstrated at the promotion ceremony – the public lapped it up. After the Paladinhood ritual, however, Ghost had taken Tanner aside and 'asked' him if their relationship would affect the mission – he was just glad they hadn't caught that bit on camera.

**\*BWAAAAP\***

The sound of the drop klaxon silences everyone. Nobody seems to know quite what to do now that the moment has arrived, but Tanner

undoes his harness and gets to his feet.

"Good luck, all. Try not to get eaten."

A chuckle runs around the Paladins and they follow his lead. One by one, they embrace each other and bid final farewells. Then, they group into their teams of three and head for the four floor hatches towards the rear of the shuttle.

Tanner, Tailor and Tinker reach theirs' first and descend the ladder into their Lockheed-Martin Helldiver II capsule below. As they take their seats, the access chute seals itself – there's no way back now. Tanner puts on his headset.

"*Smoke 'n Mirrors*, checking in."

"Why, hello there *Smoke 'n Mirrors*."

Tanner smiles. The voice is unmistakably Tomlin's.

*Maybe the Lord Paladin is just an old softy after all, assigning him as our handler.*

Tomlin had been seriously injured by the King Cloverhead and sadly had to have his leg amputated, putting paid to his chances of becoming a Lancer. However, after he recovered, he had been made a Knight-Sergeant at the Academy in recognition of his bravery during the attack – he would go on to become an instructor.

"*Black Magic*, checking in."

"*Cyan Dragon*, checking in."

"*Dark Angel*, checking in."

Each of the other three capsules receives the same jovial response.

"*Buenos días*, Rift-walk-ers."

Again, the heavily accented voice is instantly recognisable. It belongs to the pilot of their shuttle, the legendary Captain Hawke.

"I hope you are all ready to save the world, no? *Dos minutos* to Alignment."

The ride is already getting bumpier as they approach their target, the capsules swinging on their moorings as the huge shuttle carves a path through the Rift.

"Initiating countdown." As capsule commander, Tanner is in charge of overseeing their release from the shuttle.

"Gauges in the green." Capsule pilot Tinker's hands glide across his control panel. He's the first Paladin ever to have been promoted directly from the rank of Squire, and has come a long way since he accidentally shot Knight-Sergeant Fryer. His skill in the simulator and incredible bravery in defending the Lord Paladin had seen him chosen as Initiate Trent's replacement.

"We are go for deployment." Tailor is the capsule specialist and only the third female to make it into the Rift – the first being the legendary Katerina van Hoeven who accompanied Tiberius Ghost himself. She's also the first Empath to be deployed – normally Initiates with this skill are given roles with the Rangers or in the Lancer medical corps. She too had proved her worth on the night of the attack, and her scores were top notch.

"Alignment in sight, *señoritas y señores*." Hawke updates the Paladins from the flight deck.

"Verifying Alignment integrity, hold tight." Tomlin begins a scan of the Alignment's structure from the control centre back at the Academy – he's checking to make sure the interdimensional corridor is robust enough to allow safe passage for the four capsules. A moment later, he's back on the line.

"Alignment is good, repeat, good. We've timed it to perfection."

"Starting final approach." Hawke's voice is crackly from the magnetic interference.

"Transmitting exact coordinates now. Should put you right on the button." Tomlin is starting to break up too. Almost immediately, the

figures appear on Tinker's flight computer.

"Prepare for Butterfly Drive ignition."

Tanner and Tinker remove the safety tabs from the engine console together. The propulsion system of the capsule is Thermonuclear and uses the 'butterfly effect' to trigger switches between dimensions. Small changes in the state of deterministic nonlinear systems cause larger changes in later states – or in other words, a temporal chain reaction. On this mission, the Riftwalkers will have to execute no less than four dimension changes to arrive at the approximate location before the estimated time of the Rift's creation. However, this still provided better odds than usual, since the dimensions they would have to pass through are considered 'stable' – and thus predictable for the Butterfly Drive to navigate.

"Begin final countdown." Hawke is barely readable now.

"Wish we could see the bloody thing." Tinker places his hand on the throttle handle. The capsule's portals were currently sealed due to the high levels of radiation present outside. They'll just have to trust Tomlin's coordinates.

"¡Buena suerte!" Hawke yells.

"Bring me back some Riftrock!" Tanner wonders how long Tomlin's been working on that one.

"Here we go." Tinker's eyes are glued to the countdown timer in front of him. Tanner takes Taylor's hand.

"Deploy capsules!" Tomlin's voice.

"Capsules away... Capsules gone!" Hawke's reply.

A sudden, horrific sensation of falling. Tanner and Taylor tighten their grip on one another, while Tinker does the same to the lever.

"*Black Magic*, course correction – red three tenths." Tomlin is monitoring their freefall towards the Alignment.

"*Black Magic*, adjusting!"

"*Smoke 'n Mirrors*, course correction – green one tenth."

"*Smoke 'n Mirrors*, adjusting..." Tinker flicks the horizontal stabiliser to the right.

"All capsules, you are on course for Alignment entry! Stand by for Butterfly Drive ignition."

"Standing by..." Tinker murmurs.

"Ignition!" Tomlin yells.

"Ignition." Tinker repeats and slams open the throttle. "Ignition go!"

"Ignition go!"

"Ignition go!"

Nothing but the sound of the engine turbines spooling up. It takes Tanner a second to realise what's wrong.

"*Dark Angel*, come in?" Tomlin echoes Tanner's thoughts.

"This is *Dark Angel* – mayday, mayday, mayday! Our Butterfly Drive has failed, repeat, failed!"

There's a sharp intake of breath.

"*Dark Angel* , this is Paladin leader." Tanner speaks into his microphone. "Can you reboot the system? Repeat, can you reset?"

Repeats were becoming increasingly necessary over the noise of the static interference.

"Negative leader, it's completely dead! Drive is a no-go!"

Tanner growls under his breath. He sees the eyes of Tinker and Tailor focused on him. Then, he has an idea.

"Tommy, can you broadcast us all the coordinates of the *Dark Angel*?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

"Get on it. Come in *Cyan Dragon*, do you read?"

"Just about, leader."

"Can you use those coordinates to pull alongside *Dark Angel*?"

"We can try..."

"*Black Magic*, can you do the same?"

"We'll have a go."

The whirring of their capsule's Butterfly Drive turbines is getting louder by the second. Tanner realises they don't have much time.

"Where the Grumman are those coordinates, Tommy?"

"And... Done!"

The numbers flash up on the flight computer. Suddenly, Tinker cottons on.

"You crazy bloody... Genius."

"*Dragon, Magic*, when you get to *Dark Angel* use your limpet clamps to lock on to its hull." Tanner commands. The limpet clamps were designed to fasten down the capsule upon landing in another dimension, but would serve as a tool for makeshift docking.

"Okay, leader."

"Understood."

"*Dark Angel*, sit tight. We've got you." Despite his confident tone, Tanner realises they're running out of time. Their Butterfly Drive will start the chain reaction before they reach the stricken capsule.

"Tink... We're gonna have to throttle back."

"But we'll miss our window!" Tinker knows timing is crucial when it comes to entering the Alignment – a few seconds either way could cause them to enter completely the wrong dimension, or become an interdimensional pancake and be crushed inside a closing corridor.

"And if we don't, three Paladins are dead for sure." Tailor speaks up. That was the Empath inside her talking. There was no way the *Dark Angel* would survive the Alignment without a working Butterfly Drive.

Tinker pauses for a split second, then places his hand on the throttle.

"Ugh, to Grumman with it."

"All capsules, stand by to throttle back your Butterfly Drives. We'll decrease to seventy-five percent intensity until we have the *Dark Angel* secured." Tanner can imagine the incredulous conversations in the other capsules, but he's desperate to save them.

"Five."

Their capsule is vibrating very hard. The noise of the engines is almost unbearable.

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

"Star-Paladin Tanner." A voice sounds in Tanner's ear. It's not Tomlin's – it belongs to Lord Paladin Ghost.

"You will *not* jeopardise the success of this mission and the future of humanity for the lives of three Paladins."

"But sir, we can do this!" Tanner yells back.

"I forbid it!" The Lord Paladin booms.

"Tink, throttle back!" Tanner ignores him. Tinker nods and tries to haul back the handle, but it seems to be stuck on full power – there's nothing he can do.

"Tan, it's stuck!" He shouts desperately.

Tailor releases her harness and lunges forward to help him, but it's

too late – with a sound that's loud as thunder, their Butterfly Drive initiates the atomic change of state. There's a terrible rattling, bouncing sensation – Tanner grasps Taylor's arm and pulls her back into her seat, doing up her straps for her as he feels himself blacking out.

Before he does, his last thought is for the crew of the *Dark Angel*.

*Futurum est victima.*

*Was their sacrifice for our future?*

## 11. Chapter 11 - Close the Rift

### Chapter 11 – Close the Rift

Hopper switches on his flashlight and leads the way to the service stairwell, Tanner and Eleven following close behind. They start downwards and all seems quiet, until suddenly the Chief stops – he can hear breathing, and there's blood on the railing.

"Stay here."

Eleven obeys. Tanner ignores him. Weapons raised, they creep round a bend in the staircase and find a man in a white lab coat lying there – he's alive, but just barely.

"Shit! Hey, Doc..." Hopper clearly knows him. He turns and glares at Tanner, before calling for Eleven to come down.

"Ughhh..." The Doctor groans by way of response. By the light of the torch in Hopper's hand, Tanner spots a horrific wound on his right thigh.

"Look like it got you pretty good, huh..." Hopper growls. The injured man tries to respond, but the Chief stops him.

"It's okay, don't talk – I've got you."

Hopper remove his belt and ties it around the Doctor's leg – Tanner realises he's applying a makeshift tourniquet.

"Oh yeah, I've been meaning to tell you... This is Eleven." Hopper sees the Doctor has noticed Eleven standing in the shadows.

"Eleven, Doc Owens. Doc Owens, Eleven."

Owens looks like he's seen a ghost.

"She's been staying with me for... Uh, about a year now..." Hopper continues. "And she's about to save our asses. So maybe, when this is all said and done, you could help her out too... Help her lead a normal life. One where she's not treated like some kinda lab rat..."

You know, it's just a thought."

It's no accident that Hopper chooses this moment to tighten the tourniquet. Owens grunts in pain. Tanner decides to step in.

"Doctor Owens, don't worry. You're going to be okay."

He pulls the canister of aid spray from his belt and applies it generously to the Doctor's wound.

"Oh yeah, and this guy's name is Tanner." Hopper adds. "He thinks he's from the future."

Tanner grins at this.

"There, all done."

"Think about it." Hopper thumps Owens on the shoulder and gets to his feet. The Doctor, pain now numbed by the spray, smiles his thanks and nods. Thawing out a little, the Chief hands him a pistol.

"Don't go anywhere."

Owens chuckles painfully.

They leave the Doctor where he is and continue down the stairs, Hopper still in the lead. They arrive at the bottom and take a sharp left, plunging into the darkness of a pitch black corridor. Tanner drops his visor and they press on carefully.

*"Proximity alert."* Siri says in Tanner's ear.

A window pops up in the corner of his HUD, highlighting the danger – a room to their left, a few dozen feet in front of them.

*"Espera aquí."* Tanner's hushed voice sounds tinny to Hopper and Eleven as it emits from his helmet speakers. Then, he curses. *"¡Ah, mierda!"*

The translation system is still broken. He flicks up his visor again.

"Sorry, my helmet's had it. Stay here."

"What is it?" Hopper hisses in response.

"There're more of them up ahead, on the left. I'll clear the way." Tanner explains.

"How the hell do you know?" The Chief demands.

Tanner decides not to try and explain the Sixth Sense.

"My helmet told me."

Proving his point, there's an inhuman *gurgle* from up ahead. Tanner shrugs. Hopper shakes his head.

"Okay."

"Stay hidden. I'll yell when it's clear." Tanner lowers his visor once more and moves up to the door.

Hopper watches him go, speechless.

**\*Guuuuuuurgle\***

It's louder; he's on the right track. There's a faint glow emanating from the doorway in front of him – he assumes it's emergency lighting – and something flashes across it, casting a crazy shadow on the corridor wall.

"*Three beings detected.*" Siri informs him cheerfully.

"Understood."

He stands pressed against the wall beside the door, briefly dipping into the Sixth Sense – he has a sudden sensation of déjà vu and remembers breaching into the Shock Box with Trent many months ago. It feels like another lifetime now.

"*Beings identified as category five.*" Siri adds.

**\*Grrrrruurh\***

He checks his weapon – it's fully charged. He looks back over his shoulder and sees Hopper and Eleven tucked into an alcove. He takes

a breath.

Then he steps inside.

"Come on then, bitches!"

"¡*Vamos, putas!*"

Of course, it comes out in Spanish.

**\*Screeeeeeeeeeech\***

The nearest Crawler reacts to his sudden arrival and Hispanic battle cry with an ear-piercing scream. Tanner immediately locks on and toasts it with a high-intensity blast – its scaly skin melts before his eyes. He scans around for the other two and spots them, just as they disappear through a smashed glass partition in the centre of the room.

*Running away?*

He follows quickly and freezes at the sight that meets his eyes.

It's the Rift.

But *smaller*.

On the other side of the shattered glass, the floor drops away to reveal a vast pit – even with his night vision, Tanner can't make out the bottom. Perhaps fifty feet below and on the far side of the crater is the entrance to the Rift itself; the same red, pulsating cloud; the same tangle of thick, black vines. While massive, to Tanner it seems so small it can have only just been created – it's *younger* too, its colour more vivid.

He can't believe he's made it.

He takes all this in within the space of a half second, while trying to spot the two escaping category fives. He can't see them, however, and closes his eyes momentarily to use the Sixth Sense.

They've disappeared.

Tanner can only assume they jumped into the pit. Why they would do such a thing is beyond him, unless it was to fetch backup – but surely the Reanimator in control would be capable of sending more anyway? He decides to follow the Chief's advice from earlier and take it as a blessing.

"Clear!" He shouts, popping his visor and examining the room more closely. A moment later, he's joined by Eleven and Hopper. The latter looks around dubiously.

"How many?"

"Three." Tanner replies, then gestures to the pit. "But two jumped in there."

"And that's where we need to go." Hopper growls, moving to a platform suspended on cables above the sheer drop.

"Then let's get started." Tanner follows him.

"Not so fast." Hopper pulls a two-way radio from his belt. "We wait until that thing is out of Will."

Tanner turns away, trying desperately to hide his frustration. Who knows how much time they have before the category fives come back with backup?

The seconds tick past.

Then the minutes.

"Listen..." Hopper breaks the silence and addresses Tanner. "How do you plan on... Y'know, getting back there? Where you came from?"

This was, of course, the million dollar question. The only man ever to manage this and return from the past was Lord Paladin Ghost himself - it was referred to as 'riding the wave'. He had pulled it off after a mission in which he'd partially closed the Rift – slowing its enlargement temporarily – by setting off a nuclear bomb. This was the stuff of legend.

"I have to get back inside the Rift just before it shuts. The energy

caused by the closure will create shockwaves through time which I can use to get home."

The return journey is supposed to be undertaken in a capsule, but Tanner doesn't suppose it matters – he doesn't really have much choice. Of course, it wasn't possible to predict the exact result the Rift closing would have on the 'future' – some say it would become a completely alternate reality – but that was better than humanity's current hopeless situation.

Hopper doesn't begin to understand this explanation, but nods anyway.

"Okay. Let me know if I can help."

Tanner wants to scream at him that he can help by hurrying up and closing it. Thankfully, at long last, the radio crackles into life.

"Chief? Do you copy?"

"Yeah, I copy." The Chief replies.

"Close it."

The message is simple. It means Will is free. Tanner feels a chill run through him. It's time.

"Right, all aboard."

Hopper and Eleven join Tanner on the platform. The Paladin presses a button marked 'down' and, with an electric *whirr*, the platform begins to descend into the pit. Eleven crosses to the railing and looks out at the Rift – it seems huge to her, and she reaches out to take Hopper's hand. Tanner checks his weapon again and leans over the other side, searching for any sign of the category fives in the Rift's eerie red glow.

*Still nothing.*

They reach a point roughly fifty feet down and Hopper shuts off the winch. The platform hangs motionless, dwarfed before the gaping mass of the Rift. Eleven releases Hopper's hand and stares deep into

the tear in space and time, a deadly determination in her deep brown eyes. Tanner has a sudden sensation of her power – it's the strongest thing he's ever felt. Now he knows why the others believe her capable of closing the Rift – and he does too.

Slowly, Eleven raises her hand. Tanner knows this technique – it's used to teach Initiates how to focus. It dawns on him that, despite her incredible power, she's never had any training – in this time, abilities are not commonplace.

For a moment, nothing happens. Then, the Rift begins to glow. There's a deep growling from somewhere deep inside, and a thin trail of blood trickles from Eleven's nose.

Tanner gulps.

On the other side, a shadow, vast beyond all imagining, is stirring. It takes no form, casting only crazy, semi-formed shadows against the crimson light.

*It's the Reanimator. It's right there.*

Somehow, Tanner feels Eleven falter at the sight. He realises something else now, too; she's scared. And of course she is; she's not a Paladin. Her entire life hasn't built up to this moment. She's not even old enough to become an Initiate.

Tanner moves forward until he's standing behind her and places his hands on her shoulders. She flinches a little at the contact, but keeps staring straight ahead, transfixed by the Rift. Gently, Tanner guides her so that she now has both hands outstretched in front of her.

"You can do this." He says in a whisper, then repeats the words of his Sixth Sense teacher.

"Don't fight the feeling. Let yourself slip away; embrace the power. Imagine you're floating... Just floating..."

For a second, he's afraid it hasn't worked. Then, the edges of the Rift begin to *flicker* – she'd listened.

"That's good, that's really good... Now, let it wash over you... And

channel it."

More *flickers* – a slight *wavering*. The shadow within recoils.

"Find something that makes you *feel*... Use that to focus on your target..."

The edges of the Rift begin to knit together. Tanner can scarcely believe it's working.

"That's good, that's so good..."

He slowly backs away. Eleven's too intent to notice. He exchanges a glance with Hopper and then both go back to watching the Rift – the shadow is writhing now, seemingly in agony.

*It's closing.*

Now, the top and bottom of the tear are no longer visible, knitted together and vanished into the pit wall. It's almost done. It's time for Tanner to go.

"Thank you, sir... For your trust... And for saving humanity." He extends his hand to Hopper.

"Safe travels, kid." The Chief shakes it.

Tanner climbs over the railing and swings himself up onto the roof of the platform. Then, slinging his gamma gun over his shoulder, he lowers his visor one last time and leaps into the Rift.

## Outside

**\*Screeeeech\***

Hopper jumps at the terrifying cry. Somewhere far below, there is the sound of hundreds of scampering feet.

**\*Screeeeeeeeeeeeech\***

*Shit. He can see them. They're scaling the walls.*

**\*Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech\***

One of the horrific creatures pokes its head through the railings, the extra weight causing the platform to swing on its cables – Hopper swiftly takes aim with his assault rifle and fires into its open jaws. The beast detaches from the platform and plummets back to the bottom of the pit.

**\*Screeeeeeeeeeeech\***

Another, this time on the roof. Hopper spins and dispatches this one, too – it almost takes a chunk out of his arm. He crosses to the railing nearest the wall and, in the light of his torch, sees the rock face alive with squirming creatures.

"Shit!"

He opens fire a third time, but barely makes a dent in their numbers.

**\*Click\***

The gun's empty. He flings it down and quickly unslings his shotgun, but not before several more of the creatures jump onto the platform. He fires again, each shot finding its mark, but he can't keep up with the sheer number of the creatures – for each one he kills, two more leap onboard. He's getting overwhelmed. He just has to hold out long enough for Eleven to finish closing the gate.

## **Inside**

"Ughh..."

Tanner coughs, trying to get his breath back as he struggles to his feet. It's dark, but at the same time not dark – he can make out trees that rise high above his head all around him. He's in a forest. Abruptly, a cold wind cuts through his suit like a knife and he turns; behind him is the Rift, and standing over it is the most horrible monstrosity he has ever seen.

It seems to be made of nothing more than darkness, swirling like a fog over the ever-dying glow of the Rift. It seems to have taken the shape of a twisted six-legged spider, its half-dozen horrendous limbs leading to a hideous egg-shaped central nodule. One of those legs is hooked into the Rift right now – as Tanner's vision clears, he realises

he can see through the tear in space and time. The Reanimator is trying to reach Eleven. It's going to stop her closing the Rift.

*Not on my watch.*

Tanner hadn't travelled through decades to see this hideous Riftdweller stop him. He brings the gamma gun up to his shoulder and unloads the entire cell into the Reanimator's body. He lowers it again and gazes in disbelief – the fog-like dark matter making up the creature had simply shifted to allow the microwave rays to pass through, leaving it unharmed.

Reloading with slick precision, Tanner tries again, but the result is the same – his weapon has no effect. This time, however, it seems the Reanimator notices his presence. It sends a tentacular leg snaking in his direction, forcing him to take cover behind a tree.

*How do I kill something I can't hit?*

He snaps a new cell into place reflexively. He's running low on both ammunition and ideas. His grenades are long gone, as are most of his other supplies.

*There has to be a way.*

Then he remembers.

It's something his teacher had said.

*"The Sixth Sense doesn't tell you where Riftdwellers are. It connects you with positive matter, showing you where they're not. It's the ability to sense changes on the spatial plane – changes caused by beings from another dimension. You can feel the space they fill."*

Tanner knows what to do.

He rips the back panel off his gamma gun, exposing the circuitry. He disconnects a wire and splices two others together. He removes a component, then reverses the polarity of another. It's ready.

He steps out from behind his tree and sees the tentacle almost upon him. His HUD is going haywire, so he opens his visor – to hell with

the radiation. He closes his eyes and feels the Sixth Sense; immediately he's hit with a wave of pain caused by the Reanimator's presence nearby. Eyes still closed, he begins to walk forward until he's all but touching the twisting, turning limb. He can feel it there, in front of him.

He raises his weapon. Backwards.

The limb touches.

Agony.

Tanner shoots himself.

He feels the wave of electricity go shooting through him, and instantly wonders if he's made a terrible mistake – but then he feels it sucked out of him, conducted away through the limb of the monstrous being. It seems to realise what's happening and recoils away, but too late – the damage is done.

**\*Aiiieeeeeeeee\***

It screams.

Tanner opens his eyes just in time to see the creature lose its hideous shape and transform into a swirling cloud. While not enough to kill it, the charge it had absorbed had hopefully destabilised its matter long enough for Eleven to finish closing the Rift. Mission accomplished.

Tanner's visor slides down by itself.

*"Video message on screen."* Siri says calmly.

"Not now, Siri!" Tanner wonders if the charge from his gamma gun had fried the AI's chip.

Siri ignores him.

The video flashes up on his HUD, blocking his view of the world outside. For some reason, his visor release won't work.

Then, he stops.

The video is of Lord Paladin Ghost.

"Congratulations on successfully initiating closure of the Rift, Paladin. You have made humanity proud and will forever live on in legend. On behalf of the Academy and population of the Earth, I thank you for your sacrifice."

Ghost is sitting at his desk – Tanner recognises it from his office.

"Time is short, so I'll keep this brief. You will no doubt be preparing to 'ride the wave' back home and receive your hero's welcome. However, it is my unpleasant duty to notify you this will not be possible."

As if realising the enormity of these words, Ghost pauses for a moment.

"The stories you have heard about my returning from beyond the Rift are, alas, false. A fabrication for the purposes of morale. I am truly sorry to say that there is no way for you to return."

It hits Tanner like a train. Suddenly, all the talk of 'sacrifice' made sense.

*It wasn't an 'if'. It was a 'when'. There was never any way back. We're meant to die.*

"I regret to inform you that your options are limited. You may either live the remainder of your existence within the Rift – your capsule is designed to last up to a decade – or we advise you to detonate your internal fail-safe charge. We thank you again for your service and remind you that humanity's future is because of your sacrifice. *Futurum est victima!*"

The Lord Paladin salutes the camera and the screen fades into the Ghost Academy logo, then to black.

Tanner rips off his helmet and hurls it against a tree.

The story he had been brought up on – hell, every Squire at the

Academy had been brought up on – was a lie. In the words of the Lord Paladin, a fabrication for the purposes of morale. And now, after fulfilling his purpose, he'd just been told to commit suicide.

*My friends died for that man.*

Even through his fog of emotions, something catches his eye. On the other side of the Rift, he sees Eleven – with dozens of category fives behind her. They're about to reach her. She won't close the Rift in time.

And Tanner is damned if it's all been for nothing.

## **Outside**

**\*Thump\***

One of the monsters leaps at Hopper, striking him in the chest. He dislodges the creature with the butt of his shotgun and swiftly dispatches it, but not before another one hits him from behind. He's knocked off balance and topples forward, hitting the floor hard. He sees his weapon clatter away and over the edge of the platform. He's aware of an immense weight on top of him and rolls over to see a flash of teeth as the creature's jaws gnash inches from his face. Instinctively his hands fly to the its throat, forcing it away from him – but then he feels the platform shake again and realises more are arriving.

*He can't let them get to Eleven.*

Then something warm splatters his face and the beast's head comes off in his hands.

Standing by his side, Paladin broadsword drawn and crackling with electricity, is Tanner.

"You're back?" Hopper manages.

"Looks like it."

Tanner swings his broadsword and lops the heads off three Crawlers simultaneously as they try to jump on Eleven. Hopper struggles to his

feet.

"Uh... Thanks." He growls, picking up his assault rifle and brandishing it like a bat.

"Don't thank me yet."

Tanner stands in the centre of the platform, the legendary blade moving so fast in his hands it's a blur. Five, six, seven Crawlers leap towards him, but they are no match for the Star-Paladin's deadly skill.

*More than half of your engagements will end in a point blank situation. Never forget your last resort.*

Despite their truth, Ghost's words have taken on a bitter taste even as he repeats them in his head. This feeling spurs him on; he continues slaying the creatures with a terrifyingly cold precision.

The Rift is pulsating too brightly to watch now. The *groaning* from within rattles the platform disconcertingly. Eleven screams with effort and thrusts her hands out in front of her as far as they'll go, channelling every last drop of power into the closure of the Rift.

Her feet leave the ground.

She's suspended in mid air, the molecules around her jumping and whirling and causing a wind of cosmic proportions to whip around the wobbling platform.

The sides of the Rift almost touch.

It's metres.

Then centimetres.

Then millimetres.

Then the Rift knits together.

Then nothing.

Silence.

Anticlimax.

Eleven collapses to the floor.

Hopper propels himself across the platform and manages to catch her.

The broadsword drops to Tanner's side.

The Crawlers fall from the platform and walls, instantly lifeless.

All is still.

Hopper holds Eleven in his arms tightly. She sobs a little, exhausted beyond belief.

"You did good, kid... You did so good..." The Chief is almost in tears himself.

Tanner sheaths his weapon and sinks to the floor. He can barely breathe. He doesn't want to. It's done.

The Rift is closed.

## 12. Chapter 12 - Into the Storm

### Chapter 12 – Into the Storm

*\*Hiss\**

The inner door of the capsule airlock slides upwards, revealing a grimy Tanner standing on the other side. He steps though and taps the side of his helmet, retracting his visor.

"Morning." He says.

"Hmf." Tinker, hunched over his computer terminal, doesn't look up.

"How'd it go?" Tailor enters the laboratory from the crew quarters. She goes over to Tanner and drapes her arms around his shoulders in greeting. He smiles and plants a quick kiss on her lips.

"Ugh." Tinker chooses this moment to look up from his work. It seems he's not in a particularly eloquent mood this morning.

"Get a room, you two."

Tanner grins and breaks away reluctantly. "Get over it, Wheelie."

'Wheelie' was a nickname Tinker had acquired within the first week of the mission, reflecting his third wheel status aboard *Smoke 'n Mirrors*.

"So, what've you got for me?" Tailor laughs as Tanner crosses to the workbench at the rear of the lab.

"Shops were closed, so you'll have to make do with some dirt." Tanner replies with a grin.

"How romantic." Tinker mutters darkly.

"My lucky day." Tailor ignores Tinker and takes a small satchel from Tanner. She empties it onto the workbench, sending a handful of vials clattering out.

"Careful with those." Tanner chides lightly.

"Plenty more where they came from." Tinker grumbles.

Gingerly, Tailor undoes the top of one of the vials and tips the contents onto the table, then presses a button on the nearby console. The surface flashes white as its built-in sensors analyse the matter presented to it. A moment later, the terminal beeps. Tailor and Tanner turn to look at it, expecting the results of the soil test, but instead see a red alert box flashing urgently on the screen. Looking over his shoulder, Tanner sees the same message on Tinker's screen.

*'WARNING: Particle Storm Detected'*

"Shit, not another one." Tinker jumps up and jogs through the hatch to the bridge. Tailor and Tanner follow.

"Stand by for emergency blastoff." Tinker quickly takes his place at the helm. He pops a plastic cover on his instrument panel and pushes the large red button it protected.

"Powering up thrusters." Tanner straps himself in beside Tinker. He slams forward a lever situated on the quadrant between them and immediately a dull roar fills the cabin.

"Scanning for relocation site." Tailor calls above the noise of the engines from her position behind her colleagues. She flicks a switch on her console and an array of dials and screens spring to life before her.

"Let's get this bird in the air." Tinker pushes another button and the radiation shield slides back from the window, revealing the blackened, desolate wasteland outside. In the distance, there is a twisting, turning mass of what looks like *nothing* – a tempestuous column of pure darkness. The particle storm is closing in.

"Limpet clamps disengaged." Tanner pulls a lever by his feet. There's a deafening clap of thunder. There hadn't been much warning.

Tinker's hand moves to the four throttle handles on the quadrant and he eases them forward together. The roar reaches fever pitch, then begins to recede as the capsule shudders and detaches itself from the

surface of the dark dimension they had called home for the past three weeks. As they climb, he steadily increases the power, sending *Smoke 'n Mirrors* arcing upward through the angry otherworldly sky.

"Positive rate." Tanner vocalises the readout from his instruments.

"Found one!" Tailor calls. "Inputting coordinates now."

The navigation system *pings* and the information on Tinker's flight computer changes. Swiftly, he navigates through several menus and accepts the suggested course, before switching on the auto helm and taking his hands off the controls.

"*Navigation system engaged.*" A robotic female voice announces calmly. There's a brief sensation of weightlessness as the thrusters adjust to their new orders and the ship stabilises.

"That was close." Tailor says, after a moment. Tinker doesn't reply. Tanner twists in his seat to look back at her.

"Lucky I got back when I did, or you'd have had to go without me."

"Forget the storm, I had to persuade Wheelie not to abandon you the moment you went out the door." Tailor laughs.

Still no reply from Tinker. Tanner turns to look at him. He seems deeply engrossed in his instruments.

"What's up, Tink?"

"Tails, can you check those coordinates again? Looks to me like they'll take us straight through the storm." Tinker is clearly uneasy.

Tailor frowns. "I'm positive those were..." She trails off as she looks down at her own screen and comes to the same conclusion as Tinker.

"Strange... I'll plot another course."

The navigation system *pings* again. Tinker resets the coordinates and once again the robotic lady informs them that the auto helm has been activated.

"Could be interference from the storm confusing the sensors?" Tanner suggests.

"Uhh... Tails?" Tinker has gone from uneasy to just plain anxious.

"But that's... That's impossible..." Tailor breathes.

"What's impossible?" Tanner demands, feeling a sudden prickling in the back of his neck.

"The storm... It's *moved*." Tailor replies, almost at a loss for words.  
"It's like it... *Mirrored* our course change."

"You're right, that's not possible." Tanner says firmly. "Are you sure there's not a problem with our instruments?"

"See for yourself." Tinker points out the window at the vast black whirlpool in the sky. It's still dead ahead and closing on them fast.

"We'll see. Hard to starboard." Tanner commands.

Tinker obeys, disengaging the auto helm and angling the capsule's thrusters sharply until the capsule is pointing in the opposite direction – back the way they've just come.

"There, see? Nothing to..." The words die on Tanner's lips. In the corner of the cockpit window, a very familiar dark typhoon is slowly moving into view.

"Ah. Okay. That's something."

"Yeah. Something." Tinker nods.

"Are we even sure it's a storm?" Tanner asks over his shoulder. Behind him, Tailor busies herself with her instruments, but then looks up helplessly a moment later.

"Can't even tell how big it is. I've never seen readings like it."

This was quite a statement coming from the top-scoring Paladin Tailor.

"Mark one eyeballs it is, then." Tanner turns back to face the front. The storm, or whatever it was, is now filling the entire window. It seems that, like it or not, they're going to end up inside.

"Shit. I don't like this." Tinker murmurs, his knuckles whitening as he grips the controls tightly.

"Snap." Tailor agrees.

"Stay cool. We'll be fine." Even as he says them, the words seem empty to Tanner. His colleagues have every reason to be uncomfortable – nobody has ever been inside a particle storm before. They have no idea what awaits them.

"Five seconds to entry." Tailor reports.

"Four. Three. Two. One."

She doesn't bother informing the others when they enter the storm. It's abundantly clear. The capsule rocks and bucks like an unbroken mule, forcing its occupants to cling on grimly to their seats. The sensors suddenly seem to stop working altogether, leaving the only connection to the outside world the unshielded window. All that is visible through this is a landscape of thick cloud, its colours ranging from muddy grey to an angry purple.

"Bloody hell." Tinker curses automatically.

The shaking begins to subside and Tinker regains control. The ride is still rough, but bearable now. Tanner issues his orders.

"Tails, see if you can find a way out of this bastard cloud. Tink, go loud – we don't wanna hang about in here any longer than we have to."

Tinker nods and slides the throttle handles full forward. 'Going loud' was a risk – full thrust ignited the afterburners and burnt almost double the fuel – but it's a worthy sacrifice, despite the contents of their propellant tanks being more valuable than gold out here.

Meanwhile, Tailor shuts off her computer screens and pulls open a drawer beneath her seat, revealing a set of analogue navigation gear.

She'll have to do this the old-fashioned way.

Tanner is pushed back into his seat by the powerful acceleration of the afterburners. There is no noticeable change in the scenery out the window, although it's now passing at a much higher speed. Then, suddenly, the clouds disappear. Tanner leans forward. He has to change his perspective. The sight before him is astounding.

They appear to have entered a vast cavity, formed entirely from the cloud-like substance they had been passing through until moments before. All around them, forks of lightening crackle and the dull rumble of thunder is almost constant in the background, even over the roar of the engines.

"What the Grumman..." Tinker breathes.

"Steer one-three-seven degrees analogue." Of course, Tailor hasn't allowed their surroundings to distract her from her work.

"Great work, Tails." Tanner watches Tinker carefully vector the thrusters onto the new heading.

"What is this place?" Tailor wonders out loud.

"We must have reached the centre. It's the eye of the storm." Tanner replies.

Tinker nods slowly. "Makes sense. I guess we..."

**\*BOOM\***

There's a massive explosion.

The capsule spins like a leaf in the breeze.

The lights go out, leaving the interior in darkness, save for the glow of the instruments.

A horrible, rending screech.

The lights flash back on, brighter than before, then off again.

The rotation of the capsule stabilises.

The dull red emergency lights come up.

Hanging limp in his seat, Tanner slowly becomes aware of the urgent beeping of at least half a dozen alarms.

"Ugh..." Tinker groans and shakes his head to clear it.

"You both okay?" Tailor's voice calls from behind them.

"Just about." Tanner reaches for the master reset switch and kills the incessant alarms.

"Yeah..." Tinker rubs his eyes.

"Tink, damage report?" Tanner looks at his computer for a full three seconds before realising it's smashed and lifeless.

"Coolant leak... Bulkhead fracture... Generators one and two offline... Sonar systems inoperative... Fault with mooring gear... Radiation shields damaged..." Tinker reels off the damage from his flickering screen as he scrolls through the warnings.

"Shit... And a major hull breach. Section four."

"Seal it." Tanner's voice is strained. Tinker keys in a brief command.

"Unable, resin delivery system is depressurised."

Tanner swears.

"Uh, guys..."

Both look up at the sound of Tailor's voice. Their eyes are immediately drawn to the window. Or, more specifically, what's on the other side of it.

In front of the ship is what can only be described as a massive creature.

Much like the storm, its six spidery limbs seem to be made up of nothing but columns of pure darkness. Each appendage leads to a

central ovular nodule, also apparently constructed of the cloudy matter. The purples and greys of the typhoon morph to a deep shade of maroon around the creature, while bolts of lightning flash and crack around its mighty frame.

"Bloody hell." Tinker says again. Tanner makes a snap decision.

"Stand by for Butterfly Drive ignition."

Tinker glances at him. "Are you crazy? We might not survive a jump with this much damage!"

Tailor echoes the sentiment. "Our Alignment isn't due for another six hours at least!"

She's right. The optimum time for them to make their final dimension switch isn't until much later that day. The Rift may be open, but there is no guarantee it's strong enough to support the capsule's passage. After everything they had gone through, they were about to fail mere hours from their destination.

"Listen," Tanner's voice is dangerously quiet. "I don't know what the Grumman that thing is, but I do know we won't survive another attack. We have to get out of here."

Silence for a moment. Then both Tinker and Tailor nod their agreement.

"Let's do it." Tinker leans over and slams back the four throttle handles, freeing up all remaining power. His hand moves to the lever for the Butterfly Drive. He pushes it fully forwards.

Nothing happens.

"What in the..." Tinker's eyes dart to his damaged instrument panel, searching for the reason the turbines weren't now spooling up.

"Tails, if you've got a working system back there, run diagnostics." Tanner sounds calm despite the dread rising in his chest.

Tailor does indeed have a working system. It takes her just seconds to find the answer.

"It's the hull breach in section four. Main engine compartment. Shield is damaged."

Tanner curses under his breath. He knows the engine management computer won't allow the drive to activate unless the compartment is fully sealed off – a safety feature to protect the crew from radiation. Ironically, a safety feature that could end up getting them all killed.

"Section four, yeah?" Tanner unbuckles his seat harness and gets to his feet. Tinker immediately spins round to look at him.

"Where the Grumman are you going?"

"To seal the hull." Tanner goes to one of the overhead lockers.

"You do realise that shield is on the outside, right?" Tinker looks at him like he's crazy for the second time in as many minutes. Tanner supposes he may have a point as he reaches up and retrieves a Glock 106 gamma rifle.

"And now he's gonna shoot the Rifty with his peashooter. Of course he is." Tinker, who had undone his own harness and stood up, sinks back into his seat in exasperation.

"Tink's right." Tailor takes Tanner by the arm that's not clutching the weapon. "It's too dangerous."

"Doesn't look to me like there's any alternative." Tanner says grimly.

"Then let me go!" Tailor sounds desperate.

"You're needed in here to help Tinker with navigation." Tanner replies. "He can fly just fine without me. Besides, I'm already suited up and there's no time to get you ready."

Tailor doesn't know how to respond. Tanner speaks again before she has to.

"Keep her steady for me, Tink."

Tinker nods his head sadly. "Just so you know, I think you're bloody crazy."

Tanner had guessed that much. "Duly noted."

"Be careful out there." Tailor leans into Tanner for a kiss. They stay like that for a moment, before Tanner breaks away with a wink.

"Aren't I always?"

He hears Tinker snort loudly behind him.

Tanner turns and leaves the bridge, jogging towards the airlock in the laboratory. He enters and thumps a button on the wall. The door hisses downwards, its movement more jerky than usual. Tanner touches the side of his helmet and his visor clicks into place, the HUD initialising within a half-second.

"*Back so soon?*" Siri's greeting is decidedly sardonic for a supposed AI.

"How much juice do we have?" As Tanner speaks, there's the dull whirr of the airlock adjusting its pressurisation.

"*Paladin Exosuit functioning at 83% power.*"

"We're gonna need every drop of that."

*\*Hiss\**

The outer door opens. Not all the way; it sticks roughly two thirds of the way open. However, it's enough, and Tanner scrambles through the gap and grabs the handle on the outside to the left of the door. He swings himself out into the slipstream, his body rising under the force of the airflow until he's almost horizontal. His first thought is the thunderous noise of the air passing by – he can barely hear the roar of the thrusters a dozen feet below him.

"Deafen!" Tanner yells. Instantly, the crescendo is reduced in volume by half as his helmet filters get to work.

That's better.

"Right, Siri, get me some grip."

"*Calibrating your contact surfaces for optimum grip.*"

His gloves and boots tighten.

*"Calibration complete."*

Gingerly, Tanner takes one hand off the handle and tests out his glove on the bare metal of the capsule. It sticks like glue. With a deep breath, he releases the other and places it on the hull, then brings his feet forward to do the same. Adopting an uncomfortable, spider-like gait, he makes his way down the exterior of the capsule until he reaches the rear. Instantly, he can see the problem – there's a large tear in the metal directly below the Butterfly Drive coolant inspection panel.

"Tanner to bridge, do you read?" Tanner unstraps the gamma gun from his back and flicks it to a low range setting.

"Ah... You're not... Dead!" Tanner grins at Tinker's reply, his sarcastic tone obvious despite the heavy static that broke up the message.

"Alive and kicking." Tanner reports, setting to work on the damaged section of hull with his weapon acting as a makeshift welder. He's almost surprised to see it working – his idea had been a long shot, but the metal seems to be melting together nicely under the intense heat of the microwave rays. He'll be done in no time.

**\*Screeeeeeeeeeeech\***

Despite the baffles in his helmet, the sound almost shatters his eardrums. He reflexively checks his shoulder. The shadow being has spotted the capsule. Then, his Sixth Sense hits him; it's the most powerful reaction he's ever felt. It takes every fibre of his mind to stay focused on task.

"Almost done..."

"Argh... Bloody... Grumman... Shitting..." A broken stream of obscenities from Tinker fills Tanner's ears. He's seen the creature approaching. In a strange way, it's just what he needs to help him concentrate.

The last strands of twisted metal knit together.

"Done! Fire the drive! Fire it now!" Tanner yells as he slings the weapon back over his shoulder.

"GET BLOODY INSIDE!" Tinker screams from his earpiece. Tanner executes a less-than-graceful turn and scrambles back towards the door.

"Thirty seconds!"

"You've got bloody twenty-five!" Tinker shouts back. "The Butterfly Drive is powering up!"

Even from outside, Tanner can hear the dull whine slowly building in intensity. No more than a hundred feet away, the vast creature senses something is up too – it redoubles its efforts to reach the capsule.

"Fifteen." Tinker reports. For the first time, there's no jocularly in his voice.

"Shit!" Tanner abandons his attempts to crawl back along the hull and begins to move forward in a series of leaps. He can see the open airlock door just feet away.

"Ten seconds." Tinker says.

"Tan, we're going to throttle back!" Tailor's voice in Tanner's ear for the first time.

"That's a negative, stay at full power!" Tanner yells back. He makes a last desperate jump for the airlock and nearly makes it, but ends up grasping at thin air and the slipstream blows him back further than where he started. He suddenly has a dull realisation that he actually might not make it.

"Five seconds, we're going to 75%!" Tinker says.

"Stay at full power, that's an order! Complete the mission!" Tanner's voice is strained but suddenly calm. It's as if certainty of his fate has given him clarity.

"For Grumman's sake, Tan!" Tailor screams in frustration.

"You bloody stubborn bloody..." Tinker's insult trails off as the whine reaches fever pitch. The Butterfly Drive has activated. There's no turning back now.

"I'm gonna miss you guys. Close the Rift for me." Tanner mumbles into the intercom, unsure if he really wants his colleagues to hear. He feels the capsule begin to vibrate and closes his eyes.

He lets go.

Something makes him reopen them.

Time seems to run in slow motion.

The swirling interdimensional wormhole created by the Butterfly Drive is expanding around *Smoke 'n Mirrors*.

The shadow monster makes one final lunge for the capsule. It *connects*.

The capsule stops still, frozen in mid air.

The wormhole keeps on expanding.

It's actually gaining on Tanner, despite his freefall. Still, the capsule is frozen.

Then it *explodes*.

"NO!"

Of course, the cry from Tanner doesn't leave his helmet. The silence around him is eerie. And, still, the wormhole keeps expanding.

It reaches Tanner.

There's a brilliant flash.

And then he knows no more.

It's dark.

Very dark.

Then, not so dark.

Tanner can just make out the tops of fir trees, illuminated in the moonlight and swaying slightly in the breeze. He realises he's lying flat on his back and sits up rather more sharply than advisable – an agonising pain shoots through his back.

"Ugh... Shit..."

The HUD flickers inside his helmet. It's trying to come back on. After a few tries, it succeeds, and a timed alert box pops up before his eyes.

*'WARNING: Unit Damaged – Limited Functionality Available – Attempting Repairs'*

As if to emphasise this point, his HUD dies momentarily before flickering on again.

Then it hits him.

Tinker and Tailor are probably both dead.

'Probably', who's he kidding? He saw their capsule explode. Of course they're both dead.

*No. Not them too.*

"Ugh..." He groans again as his Sixth Sense warns him of approaching danger. He just has time to hit the deck again before a creature scampers by. He automatically identifies it as a category five.

As he watches it on his way, a chink of light catches his eye through the trees – the Crawler is apparently headed straight for it. Impulsively, and more to avoid thinking about the fate of Tinker and Tailor than anything else, he gets to his feet and reclaims his gamma rifle from the ground beside him. He starts off after the beast, and after a while realises that the light is coming from some form of dwelling – he can see it diffusing through a window in the distance. With Siri still down, Tanner has no idea where or even when he is, but one thing is certain.

He wants *revenge*.

## 13. Chapter 13 - Get Cold

### Chapter 13 – Get Cold

Inside the Byers' residence, all is quiet.

Will is fast asleep on his bed. Joyce and Jonathan are there too, collapsed in chairs and dozing.

Jonathan had insisted that Nancy take his room. She sleeps fully clothed on the bed, the door half open. Hopper is snoozing on a pull-out in the kitchen, while Steve is on the couch in the lounge.

On the floor next to him are the kids; Dustin is half-propped up against the couch, covered almost entirely by a rug; Lucas and Max are in sleeping bags next to him; and Mike and Eleven have a blanket each. Even as they sleep they're still holding hands.

Tanner, sitting in an old armchair, smiles a little as he takes in the peaceful scene before him. A cool breeze gently lifts the curtains of the broken window, and he looks up to see the very first tinges of dawn creeping across the sky.

He's never seen the sun before, of course.

Quietly, he gets to his feet and crosses to the door. It's unlocked, and why wouldn't it be – the monsters are gone. He passes through and leaves it open for fear of making a noise and waking the others, then leans against the railing of the porch and gazes up in awe at the pink and orange rods of light that now strike across the heavens.

It's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

Happy and sad at the same time. It reflects his emotions perfectly. Happiness at the scene he has left behind him. Sadness at what has to come next.

*It's time.*

It's now light enough to see. Tanner tears himself away from the glorious sunrise and turns towards the steps, preparing to take his

final walk into the forest away to his left. He wouldn't have to go far, just far enough so that no one would see the explosion.

Before he can descend the steps, a noise from behind makes him freeze. Instinctively he spins on his heel, ready to react to whatever threat awaits him – then he remembers where he is and relaxes. Mike stands framed in the doorway, clutching a blanket and clearly a little frightened by the aggression of Tanner's movements.

"I'm sorry... I... I didn't mean to..." The boy stumbles over his words.

"Hey, no, I'm sorry. Old habits." Tanner smiles at him.

Mike smiles back, relieved, and joins him at the railing.

"It's beautiful, huh? I brought you this. Thought you'd be kinda cold." He hands Tanner the blanket.

Tanner smiles again.

"Thank you."

In reality, the Paladin, being used to the freezing temperatures of the Rift, had barely noticed the chill in the air – but the gesture was touching and awakened something inside him he thought was lost forever. He drapes it across his shoulders, then offers a corner to Mike, who accepts and tucks himself in too.

For a time, they say nothing, and Tanner almost forgets why he came outside. They watch the dawn together, marvelling at the watery sun as it begins to drift above the horizon.

"Hey, umm... I wanted to ask... I hope you don't mind..." After a while Mike speaks, but isn't sure how to phrase the question. Tanner turns to him enquiringly.

"It's just, earlier... The way you kept looking down at yourself... It was like you thought you were gonna disappear, or something..."

Tanner looks up at the sunrise again.

"I suppose I wasn't sure what would happen." He says slowly,

choosing his words carefully. "Staying here... Wasn't exactly the plan."

"Oh." Mike nods.

Tanner can tell he's not entirely satisfied. The boy pauses, hoping that Tanner will elaborate, but speaks up when nothing more is forthcoming.

"Well... If it means anything... We're glad you did."

Tanner smiles once more. He's making quite a habit of it.

"Listen, I know you're, like, from the future, but the party - that's me and my friends - we do like, a thing together... We go on quests and stuff. And, well, I'm the Paladin, but what I'm trying to say is... If you want to come sometimes... We can have two Paladins." Mike pauses both for breath and to see how this is being received. Tanner's face is impartial. This is mainly because he can't make head nor tail of what the boy's saying.

"After all, you're a Star-Paladin anyway, so it's not the same thing at all really. If you see what I mean." Mike adds. His heart pounds as he watches Tanner's continued attempts to make sense of this. Eventually, he gets a response.

"Us Paladins need to stick together. There's nothing I'd like better." Tanner chuckles.

Mike beams. He almost looks as happy as when he first saw Eleven returning unscathed a few hours previously – and, for some reason, to Tanner this means everything.

"I look forward to serving by your side, good sir." Mike says seriously, deepening his voice for effect.

"Likewise, Paladin Mike." Tanner bows slightly less seriously. Mike doesn't notice.

"So, listen, I'd better go back inside now... Gotta keep an eye on El... You know how it is."

Tanner most certainly does not know how it is, but nods his deep understanding all the same. Mike continues.

"Just don't stay out too long, okay? You'll get cold."

With that, the boy turns and is gone, leaving Tanner alone with the blanket and his thoughts.

The sun is fully up now, its orange glow radiating across the misty countryside.

Tanner takes one more glance at the forest, then makes up his mind.

He turns to head indoors.

He doesn't want to get cold, after all.

## 14. Epilogue

### Epilogue

#### Three Weeks Later

*\*Riiiiing\**

Joyce goes to the front door. She opens it cautiously, as if somehow still expecting to find some hideous monster on the other side.

"Good afternoon, ma'am."

It's Tanner, standing there a little awkwardly and holding a bunch of flowers.

"Oh, hey honey. Come in." Joyce holds the door open for him. Tanner smiles a little, bows his head and steps inside.

"I, uh... Got you these." He thrusts the flowers forward uncertainly. Joyce recognises them as the five dollar ones from the store where she works, but pretends not to notice. She knows his budget is limited.

"Aw, thank you sweetie. I'd better go and put these in some water. Why don't you come on through?"

Tanner nods and follows her into the kitchen, standing stiffly to attention as she fills a vase with water at the tap.

"So, how's work?" Joyce places it down on the worktop and busies herself arranging the flowers.

"It's good." Tanner replies. "Reminds me of home, actually. One of my duties there was repairing..." He trails off, suddenly aware he's saying too much. There is one golden rule of living undercover in a different time – don't mention to anyone who you are or where you've come from. And, while he'd had to break this rule in order to close the Rift, he didn't intend on saying anything else that could put his new friends in danger.

Joyce, in the inexplicable way she does, seems to understand. "I hope Paul is treating you well?"

Tanner chuckles. Paul, the boss of Hawkins Auto Garage, was a large, bearded man who spent most of his time in the office round the back, drinking scotch and smoking.

"He leaves me to it." Tanner has no complaints at all. The vehicles he's required to work on seem simple in comparison to the Helldiver capsules he's used to. Once he'd figured out the basics, he's had very little trouble conducting the required repairs.

Joyce finishes arranging the flowers and places the vase on the dresser – alongside five identical bouquets in varying states of decay from Tanner's previous visits.

"They're lovely, honey. Can I get you a drink?"

Tanner shakes his head politely. "Can I see him?"

Joyce smiles kindly. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

Tanner shakes his head again, this time more vigorously. "No, not at all. How has he been?"

"He only woke up once last night, and he went straight back off afterwards." Joyce meets Tanner's eyes. "He's doing well. I think he's getting better. I don't know how to thank you."

Tanner looks down at his feet bashfully. "I like coming to see you. That's as long as you don't mind?"

"Don't be silly, sweetie! We're so happy you decided to stay a while. I know Will and his friends are, especially. Come on, I'll take you to him."

Joyce leads Tanner back down the hall and stops at Will's bedroom door. She knocks quietly.

"Will, honey? Tanner's here to see you."

"Come in." Will replies almost instantly. Joyce turns to Tanner.

"See?"

Tanner smiles and steps inside.

"Hey, Will. How you doing?"

Will is stretched out on the floor, half-finished sketches and crayons scattered around him. He's barefoot and wearing a blue t-shirt and jeans – a departure from his usual dark attire, Tanner notes.

"Fine."

Joyce smiles and closes the door quietly, leaving them alone.

"I hear you only woke up once last night?"

Will colours in a section of his latest picture dark purple.

"Yeah."

"Which one was it?"

Will stops colouring and kicks his legs absently. Then, he hands his drawing to Tanner.

"This one."

Tanner takes it and perches on the corner of Will's bed. He looks at the drawing critically. As always, it's very good.

"The Reanimator."

"Yeah."

Will abandons his position on the floor and joins Tanner on the bed.

"I just can't stop... Remembering.... How it felt."

Tanner nods.

"I... I tried to kill everyone... Mum... Mike... Chief Hopper..." Tears begin to well up in Will's eyes. Tanner slides an arm around the boy's shoulders.

"It wasn't your fault. It wasn't you, remember."

"But I should've done something... I should have tried harder..."

"Listen, you remember how I killed the Reanimator just before Elev... Jane... Closed the Rift?"

"Yeah?"

"How?"

"You changed your gamma gun's circuit to reverse the polarity of its antimatter."

The explanation provided included a fair amount of artistic license, particularly as the Reanimator wasn't actually dead.

"Well, that wasn't the first time we met."

Will's eyes widen.

"You see, my crew and I were attacked by the Reanimator. We were caught in a particle storm – a huge tornado made up of dark matter. Our capsule, *Smoke 'n Mirrors*, was damaged, so I went outside to fix it. I'd just finished the repairs and was heading back inside when the Reanimator attacked us – we tried to use our engine to escape to another dimension but it caused an overload and the capsule exploded. The next thing I knew, I woke up here."

"But what happened to your crew?" Will asks.

"I don't know. Perhaps they made it home, or maybe they're still out there, somewhere."

*Except they're dead*, thinks Tanner, but doesn't voice this part.

"I'm... Really sorry..."

"Don't be. We completed the mission and closed the Rift, so their sacrifice wasn't in vain."

"I guess... It's kinda powerful, then."

"Exactly. You shouldn't feel bad. It's one of the most powerful beings every encountered. There was nothing you could do."

Will says nothing, but Tanner doesn't need his Sixth Sense to know the boy is feeling better. A moment later, Will gets to his feet and crosses to the telescope by his window.

"I wish there was some way we could look for your crew." He says. Tanner signs inwardly as he realises he's broken the golden rule again.

Will turns back to face him, eyes suddenly bright. "We could ask El!"

Tanner smiles. "It might be worth a try, But now, I want my drawing lesson. What were we working on yesterday? Shade, wasn't it?"

Will nods and scoops up a handful of crayons and a sheet of paper from the floor.

"Let's see what you've got."

Tanner draws Tailor.

## **The Snow Ball**

"You ready for this?" Steve grins, twirling his drumsticks for the hundredth time as they wait behind the curtain at one end of the Hawkins High gym hall. They can hear the muffled sound of music playing on the other side, which means it's not yet time

"You bet." Tanner grins as he adjusts the electric guitar hanging from his shoulder. "You wouldn't believe the last time I stood behind a curtain like this."

"I bet there weren't a hundred and fifty angsty teenage kids out there ready to throw shit at you if they don't like the set." Steve says with a chuckle.

"Closer to a hundred and fifty thousand." Tanner laughs back.

"Sure, big-timer."

"You jealous?"

"Why would I be? Girls love a drummer."

"You keep telling yourself that."

Outside, the music dulls and then stops. It's their cue and they step out from behind the curtain. In front of them is a narrow stage all set for a live performance; drum kit on the left, microphone stand in the middle, keyboard on the right. And in front of this is the dance floor, complete with a glitter ball and around eighty kids – all of whom staring at the new arrivals.

Without pausing, Steve makes his way to the drum kit while Tanner takes his place behind the mic. He's vaguely aware of a girl off to his right announcing them as Steve Harrington and Tan Riftwalker, and grimaces as he recalls Dustin constantly referring to him as *Tan Solo* for a good two months. He still has no idea why.

Tanner swaps a quick glance with Steve, who immediately begins a pounding drum solo to ramp up the audience. Tanner plugs in his guitar and adjusts his microphone. As Steve finishes up, it's clear he's at the very least got everyone's attention.

"Uh, we hope everyone's having a good night..."

Tanner's opening line is met with nothing but murmurings. He cuts to the chase.

"Our first song is called..."

Any slight misgivings Tanner may have had are completely gone by the time the final chords of their first song die away. The kids love it. Not wanting to lose the moment, Steve and Tanner continue playing, and find themselves unable not to smile at the sight before them.

Almost every kid in the place is on the dance floor, either with a partner or in a group. Tanner can see Mike and Jane swaying together, lost in each other's arms just in front of him. He can also make out Lucas and Max off to one side, and is elated when he spots Will dancing happily with a girl whose name he doesn't know.

However, he can't see Dustin anywhere.

Their set is a short one as they'd had very limited time to prepare since head-snow-ball-planner Mindy (yet another of Steve's ex's) had asked them to perform. Steve is, however, proficient on drums and Tanner has played guitar from the age of four – Squires are taught an instrument to tune motor skills and also to sing on ceremonial occasions – so it hadn't been hard for the two of them to learn a few songs. As they approach their final number, a tune by Bon Jovi, Tanner finally spots Dustin. He's sitting all by himself on the terraces off to the side of the gym hall, chin resting in his palms and looking utterly miserable.

Tanner plays a quick chord, then crosses to Steve and covertly gestures to Dustin. Steve follows his signal, frowns, then leans across and whispers in Tanner's ear. Tanner nods and heads back to the mic, a sly smile spreading across his features.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the night is young, but our time with you is nearly at an end. For our final song, we need the help of a very special young man... Please welcome to the stage, Dustin Henderson!"

A murmur runs through the kids, but they're having a good time and there's a ripple of dutiful applause. Dustin suddenly looks up, the expression on his face a mixture of confusion and mild terror. Tanner and Steve both beckon to him, and eventually he gets to his feet and makes his way on stage.

"Dustin will be helping us out on keyboard..." Tanner goes to collect Dustin from the side of the stage while Steve plays a quick beat.

"B-b-but... I can't play keyboard!" Dustin whispers urgently to Tanner, panicking. His eyes are red – he's been crying. Tanner bends to whisper to him, grinning conspiratorially.

"You don't need to. The keyboard's pre-recorded. Just put on a show."

Dustin gasps as if he can't quite believe Steve and Tanner would do such a dishonest thing, then suddenly grins, showing off his shiny white pearls.

"I guess I'd hate to disappoint the watching hordes." He trundles off towards the keyboard, beaming. Tanner chuckles, and Steve plays the intro.

*"Shot through the heart,*

*And you're to blame,*

*Darlin', you give love a bad name..."*

### **The Wheeler Residence, later that night**

Mike stomps upstairs as loudly as he dares and makes a beeline for his bedroom. He reaches the door and kicks it open, the handle slamming against the wall and sending flakes of plaster flying.

"Evening."

Inside, reclining on the bed and still dressed in the tight double-denim outfit Steve had insisted he wear for the performance earlier, is Tanner.

Mike is so surprised he almost falls over backwards. He opens his mouth to exclaim, then stops himself and ducks back into the hall to cast a furtive glance up and down. Only when he's sure there's nobody around does he ease the door shut, a good deal more silently than he'd opened it. Then he turns to confront his uninvited guest.

"What the hell, Tanner?"

Tanner raises an eyebrow at him and takes a long pull from the can of coke in his hand.

"How did you get in?"

By way of answer, Tanner simply casts a meaningful glance at the open window, the curtains blowing slightly in the cold night breeze.

Mike shakes his head in bewilderment and sinks down on the foot of the bed. It's been a rough night.

"Was harder without the suit." Tanner observes, referencing the climb

up to Mike's room. "Still, that tree is well placed. Convenient branches." He takes another sip from his can.

"I'm sorry, what are you doing here?" Mike snaps. He's in no mood for small talk.

Tanner goes to take another drink, realises the can is empty and crumples it in his fist.

"I just wanted a quick word with you. About tonight."

"Yeah, well, I've had enough of people wanting a word with me. I just wanna go to bed." Mike regrets the way the words come out even as they leave his mouth. Tanner, however, doesn't seem to be offended.

"I heard you and Jane got in trouble. Something about staying out late, making everyone come look for you, then the Chief catching you both behind the gym? Getting a bit... Uh, cosy?"

Mike looks down at his feet morosely, but says nothing.

"In fact, I think the words he used were 'practically leaping down each other's throats'..."

Mike cringes. "Okay, okay! Yeah, we stayed out too late. And yeah, we... Umm..."

Tanner chuckles and holds up his hands. "You can spare me the details. I already got the, uh... Full lowdown."

Mike looks up, his expression despairing. "We said we were sorry! I am sorry. I just didn't notice the time, and now Hopper's not gonna let me see Jane in like, forever, and it's all my fault..."

Mike buries his face in his hands. Tanner swings his legs off the bed so that he's sitting next him.

"I get it, you know."

Mike doesn't move.

"I get it. You didn't mean for anyone to worry. You just made a

mistake. I understand.

Mike throws him a sidelong glance.

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do. You think you're the first guy to get in trouble over a girl? Story's as old as time."

Mike says nothing, but Tanner can tell he's struck a chord.

"Anyway, all I wanted to say is... Don't give up just yet. Give it time. She's worth it."

This time Mike turns to look at Tanner, frowning as he tries to understand why he's telling him this. He's more than a touch shocked that a grown up actually seems to be on his side over this.

"What do you mean?"

"Just stick with it, okay? I've seen the way you two look at each other. Trust me, it's worth fighting for. You just gotta be patient."

"How can I be patient?" Mike shoots back, his voice sounding a lot higher pitched than he'd like. "I'm gonna be grounded for, like, forever, and Hopper isn't gonna let me see El in..."

"But, like I said, it's worth fighting for." Tanner cuts him off.

Mike turns away again, but nods his understanding depressively. He still can't believe he's almost thrown it all away.

Tanner senses this and softens. "You know, I could talk to him for you."

Mike's head snaps back round, his expression instantly changing to one of unbridled hope. "You could?"

"No promises, mind. But I'll see what I can do." Tanner tosses his empty can into the waste paper basket by the door. Of course, it's a perfect shot, and for some reason Mike finds this irritating.

"Anyway, I'll let you get some sleep. I'm off back to Steve's, we're having a house party tonight." Tanner stands and crosses to the open window. Mike follows.

"When do you think you'll talk to Hopper?"

Tanner chuckles. "I said no promises. Just leave it with me."

It's clear Mike will have to settle for this. Still, he's in a brighter frame of mind than he was ten minutes ago. Tanner throws a leg over the windowsill and takes hold of the frame.

"Oh, and Tan?" Mike adds quickly. Tanner pauses.

"Yes?"

"What you did for Dustin tonight... That was great. Really great. Thank you."

Tanner smiles. "Steve's idea."

"But still... Thanks."

Tanner winks at him. "You got it."

And then he's gone.

**Hopper's Cabin, a few days later**

*\*Bang bang bang\**

"Hey Chief, you there?"

"Come in, it's open."

Tanner's hands are full, but he manages to twist the knob and push the door open with his shoulder. It's warm inside the cabin, and Tanner kicks the door shut before placing the large brown paper bag he's carrying on the table.

"Did you get 'em?" Hopper emerges from the bedroom, dressed in a huge fur-lined jacket. It makes him look like an Eskimo.

"Yes, got plenty." Tanner opens the bag to show him. Inside is a large quantity of red and yellow maggots, writhing around in the sawdust like one single organism. Hopper puts his hand in the bag and swirls the grubs around with a grunt of approval.

"Nice."

Tanner nods and closes the bag up tight. Hopper opens a cupboard near the door and pulls out a brown leather satchel and two fishing rods.

"All ready?"

Let's do it."

Hopper drops the paper bag into the satchel and steps outside. Tanner takes the two rods and joins him, then waits for the Chief to lock the door behind them. Jane was spending the afternoon at the Byers residence, but you still couldn't be too careful. Hopper turns the key, stamping his feet against the cold.

"Remind me why we're doing this in the middle of the god damn winter? And on my day off, too?"

"Because you like it. And it's good for you." Tanner replies, matter-of-factly. Hopper mumbles something under his breath, but doesn't deny it.

"You sound like Joyce." He says instead, a hint of playfulness in his tone. Since he and Joyce had got together officially at the start of the month, these moments of good humour had been occurring more and more. It was almost as if he was going soft.

Tanner opens his mouth to respond in a suitable pithy manner, but just ends up laughing instead. They both know Joyce had put him up to this. Still, it didn't mean they couldn't secretly enjoy their weekend fishing trips. And, although he'd never admit this to anyone, it helped satisfy Tanner's genetic urge to kill. Supersoldiers from the future weren't designed for civilian life.

The hike to their preferred spot is a short one and they arrive within the half hour. Tanner busies himself setting up their rigs while

Hopper weights and baits the lines. Soon both are stretched out on the bank, watching their floaters trail in the chill breeze.

Time passes. Hopper sneezes and wipes his nose on his sleeve. He groans and wriggles deeper inside his massive jacket. Tanner chuckles.

"Feeling the cold, Chief?"

"Am I hell." Hopper growls back. Of course, it's really not fair; Tanner has a subdermal layer specifically engineered to keep out the biting cold of the Rift. For him, the temperature is nothing more than a minor irritation.

"Well, I think the fish are." Tanner observes. This spot normally yields a plentiful supply of bites, yet today they haven't had a single one. As if to acknowledge this point, a single flake of snow falls from the sky and lands on the surface of the water.

Hopper groans again. "You're shittin' me."

Tanner is getting bored too. "Tell you what, Frankie's is still open in town. If we take your truck we could be there in thirty minutes. Joyce never has to know."

Hopper considers this.

"It's not like we didn't go fishing, right?"

"Exactly. She never said we have to go for long."

Hopper gets to his feet and yanks his rod out of the water.

They pack up and make their way back through the woods, stopping to drop off the fishing kit at Hopper's cabin before climbing into his truck and setting off down the dirt track to town. The snow is heavier now and thick flakes are bouncing off the windshield.

"I found Jane in snow like this." Hopper muses out loud.

"After what happened at the school, I kinda had a feeling... Like I knew she wasn't lost at all. I left those Eggo waffles out for her in the

woods for three weeks... Three whole weeks." He chuckles at the memory. "It could have been anyone taking those boxes, but they kept on disappearing. And then one day, there she was. I was right. She was okay."

Tanner thinks back to his conversation with Mike and senses an opportunity. "I think it's amazing how much you care about her. That's why you kept her hidden for as long as you did, and why you were so mad the other night when she and Mike went walkabout."

Hopper bristles at the thought. "Wheeler, that little..." He can't even bring himself to complete the sentence.

Tanner sighs inwardly. This was going to be trickier than he'd thought.

"I don't think they made us worry on purpose. Mike seemed pretty cut up about it."

Hopper glances at Tanner, a hint of surprise in his expression. "So now you're sticking up for that cocky little...?" Again, he decides against finishing.

"No, I just... Maybe you could cut them a little slack."

"A little slack!" Hopper explodes with indignation and almost crashes his truck in the process. "Letting them go to that dumb ball *was* me cutting them some slack! And look what happens, *Wheeler* ends up with his grubby little hands all over *my daughter*..."

Tanner holds up his hands conciliatorily. Clearly he's not going to get very far with this. He decides to change tack.

"Okay, point taken. But all you want is for Jane to be happy, right?"

Hopper nods guardedly.

"Then can it really hurt for them to see each other? On neutral ground and supervised, at least? Maybe the Byers' house?"

Hopper groans. "Did she put you up to this as well?"

Tanner chuckles. "No, this one's all me. So you'll think about it?"

Hopper is cold, hungry and can see Frankie's diner up ahead. The combination of these things means he is no longer in the mood to argue. He pulls into the car park and switches off before replying.

"Maybe if you buy me dinner."

"You're a tough negotiator."

"Take it or leave it."

"The things I do for that daughter of yours."

Hopper chuckles and clambers down from the truck. Tanner follows, a slight smile playing across his features.

*"Mike Wheeler, you owe me dinner."*

***The End...***

***...Or just the beginning?***